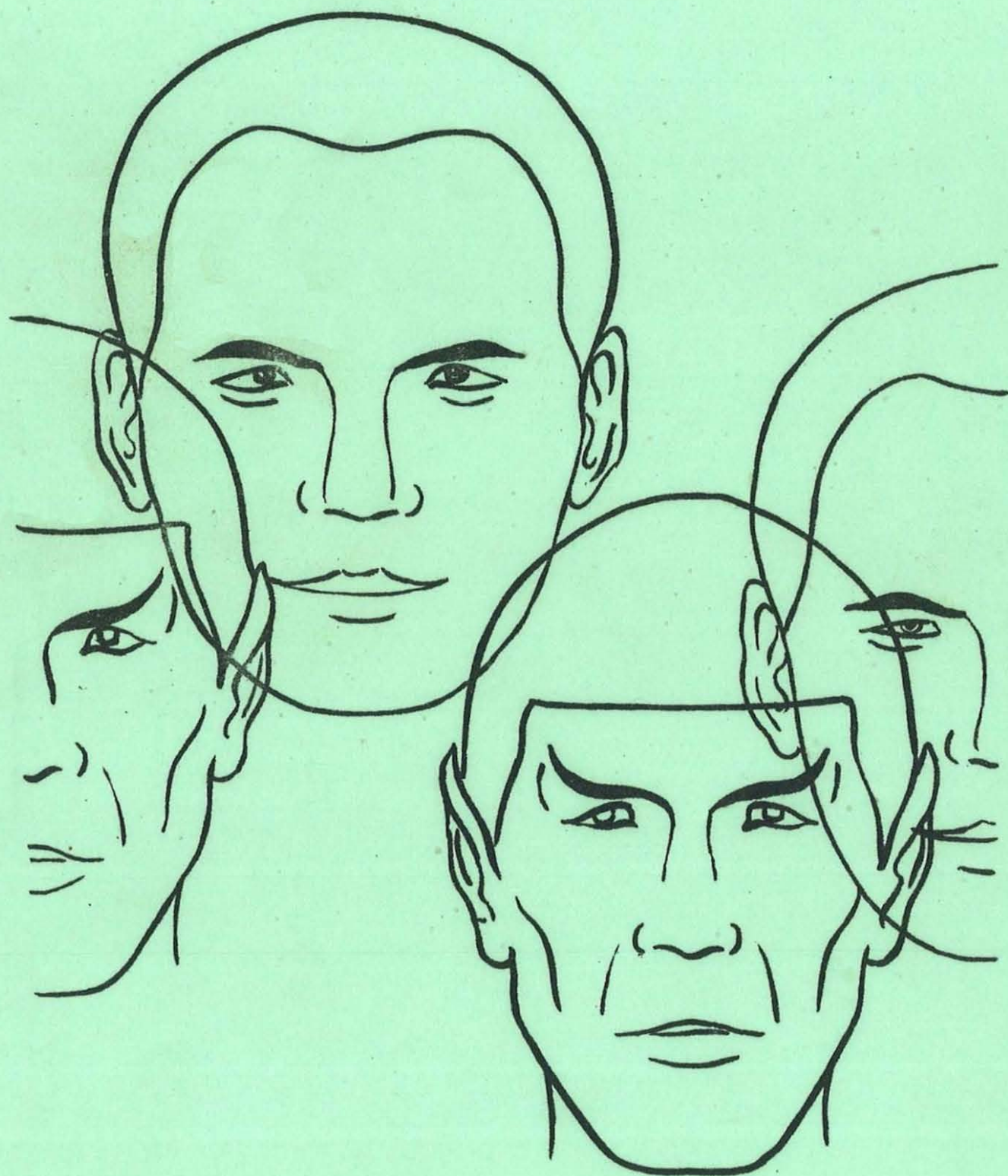


VICE VERSA

an alternate universe story

by Simone Mason



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by
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illustrated
by
Alan Mason

For Valerie, with thanks for her suggestions.

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Mirror of the Universe,
Change for better or for worse?
Turnabout, in name for name,
Friendship here remains the same.

Alan Mason.

Lieutenant-Commander James T. Kirk looked at the new stripes on the blue sleeve of his uniform with a deep sense of satisfaction. He had achieved this in Starfleet in spite of the prejudice against Humans, and he smiled at the memory of the reluctance with which his Tellarite Captain had recommended his promotion; but his efficiency was such that Vargas could not do otherwise. Now he had applied for a post as Chief Navigator and was determined not to stop there, law or no law! He had to prove how unjust... A buzz at the door of his small apartment on Starbase 2 interrupted his thoughts and he welcomed an old acquaintance from Earth, Max Haufman. The newcomer looked in high spirits.

"Congratulations, Mr. Kirk! The Party expects much of you now! I have here the news of your appointment as Chief Navigator aboard the Enterprise, a new experimental Vulcan vessel..."

"Vulcan! Oh no!" exclaimed Kirk in dismay.

"I must agree that it is not ideal, and you'll have to be extra careful. But it is a mixed Vulcan/Earth ship really, from what I have learned. The Captain and Senior Officers are all Vulcans apart from you, the stuck-up devilish... But there are many Humans among the junior officers and crew, so you'll have plenty of support."

"Any officers I know aboard the Enterprise?" asked Kirk.

"I believe so. There is Dr. McCoy for one..."

"Good old Bones! I'll be glad of his presence!"

"He is only an ordinary member of the medical staff, of course, in spite of being such a brilliant... but I digress. There is also Lt. Montgomery Scott who is assistant engineer, Lt. Sulu who is assistant navigator and Ensign Chekov who is something in the science department. You do know all these men already, don't you?"

"Yes, I know them."

"They are all good men. There are naturally other crew members affiliated to us, but no need for you to know them. Sulu will be your contact. Other than that, the less you know..."

"Yes, I'll be careful. Who is the Captain?"

"Unfortunately, he is Captain Spock, son of no less than Admiral Sarek..."

"Spock? The name is vaguely familiar... Isn't he half-Human?"

"Yes, although it doesn't show! The Enterprise is his first command, so he'll be keen to show what he can do. That's no help to you, and all our members aboard have been advised to take great care. Must go now - good luck, Mr. Kirk; your first aim is of course to reach the rank of First Officer, even if it means special permission from the Admiral, and afterwards..."

Kirk waved to him as he left and then sat down to read the notice of his appointment with pride. He was nearer to his goal at last! Putting a call ... through his videophone, he asked for details of the Starship Enterprise's crew, and as he had expected, the other Chief Navigator was a Vulcan, Lt-Commander Sirak. But then all the other senior officers were Vulcans. What a ghastly thought! Surrounded by Vulcans most of the time was not a prospect he looked forward to. And naturally the whole of the security team was made up of Vulcans.

He lay down on his small bed with a sigh. He wanted to be Starship Captain more than anything, and was not going to let any law passed by aliens stand in his way. All he could hope for otherwise was the rank of Commander and First Officer, nothing more. It was not good enough for him.

Going back in time and reviewing Earth's past history, Kirk had to admit privately that there might have been some justification for the law stopping any Earthman from holding high posts - once.

Contact between Earth and the United Federation of Planets had occurred some fifty years ago, and the knowledge of so many different races co-existing in the Galaxy had been a shock to the Humans. But it had the good effect of stopping quite a lot of racialism among Earthmen, and a rather precarious unity was achieved among nations at last. The Earth Government had applied for membership of the Federation, which had been somewhat grudgingly granted, to many Earthmen's fury. A fanatical party had sprung up overnight denouncing alien domination and interference and stating the violent rejection it should receive. Racialism had found another outlet - the aliens.

As a result, all aliens on Earth had been killed in an uproar of exalted anger and fanaticism during a single night of savage fury, the 'night of liberation'. The Federation had not retaliated with any violence, but had naturally cancelled Earth membership.

The Earth Government had to pray and beg and go through lengthy negotiations to make the Federation Council relent and admit Earth again, but with stringent prohibitive clauses, i.e. no high post or rank of any kind was allowed to Humans among the Federation hierarchy, be it administrative or space service. That was about twelve years ago and that law still stood.

It was unfair, and Kirk resented it bitterly. He knew he could command a Starship as well as any alien, and no-one had the right to deny him his life's ambition because of something he took no part in; something that happened before he was even born!

Just his luck to achieve it aboard a Vulcan ship! He had never met a Vulcan, but did not like what he had heard about them, while their mental powers were a dangerous threat.

Generally speaking, Earth people were not keen on any alien race member of the Federation, but the Vulcans were the ones they feared most, and their satanic appearance and lack of emotion did not help. 'Cold devils' was the least offensive term Kirk had heard applied to them, and while he did not mind their physical appearance (which they could hardly help!) he was not keen on the no emotion and mental power angle, and the wild tales he had heard... Even allowing for exaggeration, they were not meant to reassure him.

But the Captain was half Human! A very unexpected and unique factor! Searching his memory, Kirk vaguely remembered having read about some long rift between Admiral Sarek and his son, who had defied his father and entered the Vulcan Science Academy instead of joining Starfleet and following the Space career his ancestors had practised.

After qualifying with flying colours, Spock must have relented because he then joined Starfleet as Science Officer, and proved as able and brilliant a man as his father was, hence his rapid promotion to First Officer and then Captain. He is probably even younger than I am, reflected Kirk, and his father did not favour him at all, I bet! In fact expects him to be even better, probably, which can be a handicap, so Captain Spock must be quite somebody, and to fool him... Above all I must hide that I'm after his job, or I've had it!

One thing Kirk looked forward to was seeing McCoy again; he would have a real friend in the doctor, perhaps the nearest to a close friend he had ever known. Fiercely determined to achieve his goal, Kirk had spent little time on close ties with anyone, and when he came to think of it, could not claim any other friend. Plenty of time for that when he was Captain!

It was with well-hidden butterflies in the stomach that Kirk took the shuttlecraft to join the Enterprise, and he kept practising the Vulcan salute on the way, regardless of the mocking glance of the pilot; he had to make a good impression, and not start on the wrong foot with a Vulcan Captain.

A beautiful ship! thought Kirk, entranced, watching her as they approached, if only she was mine! She will be if I have anything to do with it, Vulcans or no Vulcans!

The craft entered the hangar deck and Kirk made his features bland as he waited for the door to open. That Vulcan Captain was not going to see apprehension in a Human!

"Everything is ready for you now, Mr. Kirk," said the pilot ironically, operating a control. The door opened and Kirk stepped out, concentrating on the simple task first, then stood at attention and made the Vulcan sign, meeting the gaze of two very black eyes as directly as he could.

"Welcome aboard, Mr. Kirk," said the impersonal voice of Captain Spock.

Kirk stared, fighting the instinctive recoil from the so cold and expressionless eyes, so dark there appeared to be no end to the darkness, and yet they seemed to bore into him. He had to look away, he could not bear that alien gaze... But he would get used to it, he had to! And yet there was something... striking about the austere and strong features, and the handsome alien was making an impact on him he was not sure how to define, but that coldness...

He swallowed, and managed to say, "Thank you, sir."

"I hope you will forgive me if I do not adopt the Human custom of shaking hands, it is not favoured by Vulcans."

"I understand, sir, this is a Vulcan ship."

"A Vulcan/Human ship is a more accurate description. If you will follow me, Mr. Kirk, I will take you to your quarters."

He followed the Vulcan, noticing the small security force nearby, all Vulcans. Not a single Human in sight, and this was not a Vulcan ship?

The Captain's yellow shirt had a strange symbol on the right side, while the left had the Starfleet emblem of command. He had never seen such a sign before, and it could only be Vulcan. Regulations allowed any race to wear a special emblem on the right if they wished. He would no doubt discover its meaning sooner or later; he would have plenty of time.

He took care to remain a step behind the Captain as required by discipline, but was able to face him as they entered the lift, and noticed that the Vulcan was slightly taller than he was, and was faultlessly dressed as befitted a Captain. There was however an innate elegance and a decisive manner which probably helped to create the impact Kirk had felt.

"You will meet your colleagues on the bridge," the Captain was saying. "We leave orbit immediately. I have looked up your record, Mr. Kirk; it is impressive and I trust you will be worthy of belonging to my crew."

"Yes, sir," replied Kirk.

They stepped out of the lift and Kirk caught sight of McCoy as the doctor saw him. They clasped each other's hands eagerly.

"Bones! How glad I am to see you!"

"I bet! I was the happiest man aboard when I heard you were coming, Jim!"

Both became aware of the impassive eyes watching them and McCoy escaped hurriedly after a Vulcan salute to Spock. "See you later, Jim."

"May we proceed now, Mr. Kirk?" asked the Captain without any trace of sarcasm in his voice.

"Yes, sir, sorry..." murmured Kirk, unsure of how to erase any bad impression. "Dr. McCoy is an old friend of mine and you know how it is when you meet a friend..." His voice petered out as Spock opened the door of a cabin.

"No, Mr. Kirk, I do not know how it is to meet a friend, but the matter is

totally irrelevant. You have one hour to settle in and familiarise yourself with the ship's layout. Then join me on the bridge."

"Yes, Captain." Kirk saluted with rigid application and watched the Vulcan leave, then sat down at his desk, staring into space and trying to put some order into his thoughts. There was something very impressive and dignified about the Captain, a quality he could not define... Strength of character? An inner strength based entirely upon himself? Yes, that was it.

That cold mask was meant to be impervious to emotions, and it was anyone's guess if there were any behind it. What an odd remark about friends... Had Kirk heard it from any Human, he would have felt sorry, but he could not feel sorry for that Vulcan, who was too proud and distinguished and...

Kirk shook his head impatiently. The Captain had made more of an impression on him than he cared to admit, perhaps because he made such an impeccable Captain? But that would not stop him from reaching his goal!

He studied the ship's plan carefully. It was an experimental Starship, therefore new to him. Then he unpacked, freshened himself up and went to the bridge, firmly ignoring further butterflies in his stomach.

No-one took any notice when he stepped out of the lift and he watched the scene quickly - so many Vulcans! But he enjoyed the sight of the colourful Starfleet uniforms, bright yellow for the Captain, green for the science department, red for engineering and blue for navigation.

There were only two Humans, Sulu at navigation and Lt. Uhura, just leaving, who smiled at him. He smiled back; he had met her before, and she was probably a member of... but enough day dreaming! He smoothed his blue shirt and stepped down, stood at attention by the Captain's chair and made a perfect Vulcan salute.

"Lt. Commander Kirk reporting for duty as instructed, sir."

"Right on time, Mr. Kirk. Meet your colleagues; Lt. Commander Sirak, the other chief navigator. Lt. Commander Salyk, science officer. Lt. Commander Somek, head of communications. Lt. Commander Senak, chief engineer."

Kirk nodded a little uncertainly to each Vulcan, remembering he could not shake hands. The Captain continued, "My senior officers include, apart from yourself, Dr. Syvik, chief medical officer, and Lt. Solek, chief of security. You'll meet both of them later. I believe you already know Lt. Sulu."

"Yes, Captain."

"Are you familiar with the type of Starship the Enterprise is?"

"No, Captain, she is different from the other ships I served on."

"She is an experimental vessel in many ways and a fascinating ship; all my officers agree about this. Take the helm, Mr. Kirk. Lt. Sulu is off duty now."

Kirk complied and the Captain came and stood at his side, observing his actions closely, which did nothing for the new navigator's peace of mind! But he was a most able officer and mastered the controls quickly.

"Very good," approved Spock. "I see your record's high standard was accurate. May I add that discipline aboard my ship is severe and applies to Vulcans and Humans alike. Highly emotional scenes such as the one with Dr. McCoy are not tolerated during duty hours and the doctor suffered a reprimand as a result."

"Captain, I was also to blame..." protested Kirk.

"Negative, Mr. Kirk, you had just arrived and were not aware that Dr. McCoy was on duty. The doctor however had no excuse. I do not wish to discuss the matter further," added an implacably cold voice in a tone which

froze Kirk. He swallowed and concentrated on his duties, remembering McCoy's fearful gaze as he saluted before leaving them, and he could not blame him.

"You handle the ship well, Mr. Kirk," said Sirak's quiet voice at his side.

"Thank you, Mr. Sirak," replied Kirk politely.

"She is a fascinating ship, as the Captain said, and she has a remarkable Captain. It is a privilege for all of us to be part of his crew."

"Yes, Mr. Sirak," Kirk hastened to assure the Vulcan. Of course the Vulcan officers had to be loyal to their Captain! Wouldn't he discover anything in his favour? A sudden thought struck him and he turned to the command chair.

"Captain, may I ask a question?"

"By all means, Mr. Kirk."

"Who is the First Officer?"

"No-one yet, Mr. Kirk. Starfleet has left it to my discretion to choose my First Officer from among my senior officers. Until then, you will all be temporary acting First Officer in strict rotation for a period of five weeks at a time. Mr. Salyk, having the longest service record, is at present acting First Officer, for the first five weeks."

A Vulcan, of course. "Captain," asked Kirk in the most respectful tone he could muster, "does my recent promotion to Lt. Commander qualify me?"

The Vulcans' stares which concentrated on him were enough to make his blood run cold. "Mr. Kirk," replied the Captain in his cold and even voice, "the question you meant to ask was 'does my being Human disqualify me?' Am I right?"

"Yes, Captain," Kirk had to agree, cursing this sudden Vulcan insight.

"That answer is an insult to the Captain," stated Salyk, "and..."

"I will deal with this, Mr. Salyk," interrupted Spock.

"Yes, sir. I regret my inopportune intervention."

Spock turned back to Kirk. "I will choose my First Officer for his ability and merit, nothing else, Mr. Kirk. To imply that I would favour Vulcans is illogical. I am the Captain of this ship and will provide her with the best First Officer available."

And I believe he will! reflected Kirk, his hopes soaring.

"Before your Human illogicality enables you to see yourself as the new First Officer, Mr. Kirk," continued the cold voice, "I would suggest that you concentrate on your work. The ship is an eighth of a degree off course and such inaccuracy will not be tolerated."

Kirk corrected the fault hurriedly, his rosy dreams squashed flat as though by a cold shower! And he had to admit that the Vulcan was right, the way to becoming First Officer was not to anticipate the event and ignore reality. So from then on he concentrated hard on his work, aware that both his Captain and Sirak were making their evaluation of his capabilities.

These must have proved adequate because the Vulcan navigator left him in charge for a brief spell. He returned when Kirk's duty period finished, as regulations required that one of the two chief navigators be on duty at all times. Kirk left the bridge after the customary Vulcan salute to the Captain and was glad to get back to his cabin; he was tired and food would have to wait. He had hardly lain on the bed when his door buzzer sounded and he was relieved to see McCoy enter with a tray.

"I thought so! No matter how hard His Lordship was on you, starvation is not a solution! Listen to your family doctor and eat up."

"Oh Bones! It's good to see you!" laughed Kirk, sitting up and starting to eat.

"Nothing like a touch of Vulcan to make you appreciate friends!" beamed McCoy. "You're due for a physical before your next spell of duty and can't present yourself half-starved."

"I'd forgotten! But I'm sorry I got you a reprimand, Bones, when we met..."

"Oh, that? Dr. Syvik did the reprimanding, quite bad enough mind you, but nothing compared to His Lordship! How did your first duty spell go?"

"Not too bad, I think. I learned that a promotion to First Officer will occur in the near future."

"Yes, so look out and grab every opportunity, Jim, we want you as First Officer."

"I'll see what I can do," promised Kirk with a smile, "but it isn't likely. A Human First Officer is only allowed by law on special permission from the Admiral himself. It won't stop me from trying, though!"

"Good for you! Instructions from the party are that you must be First Officer if at all possible, so you'll have our support."

"I must admit I like the sound of friends aboard."

"You would, with all those Vulcans around! Scotty is determined to become a chief engineer, and he's certainly good enough! Chekov makes a good team with Sulu, they're both good at their jobs."

"Any other members aboard?"

"There are, but we don't know them; an elementary precaution."

"Do you know what the Party is planning for us? A mutiny, with so many Vulcans aboard, and all the security team made up of Vulcans, would be absurd."

"I'm sure the Party's plan is far more clever than that, Jim. We'll know when we have to. In the meantime, you are the key to our success, so work hard at becoming First Officer."

"Will do, no need to prompt me for that!"

Kirk duly presented himself for his medical and met Dr. Syvik, an older Vulcan than most of the ones aboard, whose presence he found oddly soothing.

"Please tell me, Doctor," he could not help asking as he was preparing to leave, "how do you achieve such calm that it communicates itself to me in a small way?"

"Part of a doctor's training, Mr. Kirk, and easy to accomplish for a telepath. But I am not sure what you mean by 'calm'. Have you ever seen an agitated Vulcan?"

"No, no, that's not what I meant. You give the impression of having no problems..."

"Indeed? I can assure you that being chief medical officer of a Starship has its problems, but they are my problems. Why should I inflict them on others?"

"I see. It would be..."

"Illogical," finished Dr. Syvik. "Being the oldest Vulcan aboard, I may have achieved a greater mastery of myself, and as a doctor, I had to achieve this from the beginning, a question of simple logic."

Kirk was barely listening, an earlier remark by the doctor making him uneasy. It was true then that the Vulcans had the ability to influence others through their mental power, and if a doctor could project calm, someone else

could project... other things? It was not a subject he cared to discuss with a Vulcan, though!

The doctor had stopped speaking, so Kirk said hurriedly, "Yes, it is logical, Doctor." A safe enough comment with a Vulcan!

"I was not aware that Humans cared particularly about logic, Mr. Kirk, are you the exception?"

"I... I find it useful at times," replied Kirk, a little put out.

"Good, it will help your work aboard this vessel. You will find the Captain a remarkable Vulcan, and his achievement is the more outstanding because he is half-Human. I should say his strength and personality are even superior to mine."

That's a great help! thought Kirk in dismay, and I prefer not to think of all the odds against me! Or I might give up.

"Now," Dr. Syvik was saying, "the chief of security would like a word with you outside."

Kirk met the Vulcan in the corridor, and they introduced themselves formally, although without any salute; this was reserved for the Captain.

"Mr. Kirk, I know you must be aware of the discipline enforced aboard, but this ship has a mixed crew and therefore my task of keeping order would be simplified if you reported to me any possible disturbance without bothering the Captain."

"Do you mean that I should spy on the Human crew and report to you?"

The Vulcan looked very faintly disturbed. "No, sir, I assure you nothing was further from my mind. I meant any possible disturbance no matter who was involved, Humans or Vulcans both. Discipline is for all, not Humans only, and the Captain would reprimand me severely should he believe that I made such a suggestion to you."

Kirk was a little bewildered. The Vulcan sounded as though he was telling the truth, and yet with a mixed crew, trouble could easily flare up. A Human security chief would keep a watch on aliens, so why not assume that the Vulcan chief would do the same?

"Anything the matter, Mr. Kirk, Mr. Solek?" asked Spock, appearing suddenly. Kirk hesitated, wishing these Vulcans were easier to read and understand! How could he guess what was behind those impassive masks? If he was not to apply Human standards, which standards...

His silence made the Captain ask the security chief to report, and the officer gave a precise account of their conversation.

"Do you confirm, Mr. Kirk?" asked Spock.

"Yes, Captain."

"Thank you. Mr. Solek, my orders regarding the use of clear and unequivocal terms with conversing with Humans were specific and you ignored them. Consider yourself confined to quarters for one day, and familiarise yourself with accurate methods of conveying your thoughts."

"Yes, Captain."

The officer saluted smartly and departed and Kirk followed Spock to go on duty. "Captain, wasn't it my misunderstanding? Should you punish him for my mistake?" he asked with a little hesitation, not liking anyone, even a Vulcan, punished on his account.

"Illogical, Mr. Kirk. Had Mr. Solek expressed himself clearly, no mistake would have occurred. Misunderstandings through inaccurate communications can be very dangerous and Vulcans, trained in logic, should be the first to know it." Kirk could not but agree and Spock led him to the briefing room.

before continuing to the bridge. "Mr. Kirk, being the only Human senior officer means that you have to work in collaboration with Vulcans most of the time. I expect you to make allowances for the fact that we are alien to you, but I also expect my Vulcan officers to make allowances for the fact that you are alien to them. On that basis, I see no logical reason for any lack of harmony."

"No, sir," agreed Kirk.

"Should you however at any time sense any threat to yourself either as a person or as an officer, please report to me at once and I'll deal with the culprit, be he Vulcan or Human. I am both; I therefore have no reason to be prejudiced in anyone's favour."

"That is true, Captain, but... you are far more Vulcan..." Kirk stopped hurriedly, afraid of giving offence, and Spock finished for him.

"Than Human? Thank you, Mr. Kirk, Vulcan was my choice. Nevertheless, no Human under my command will be discriminated against at any time."

"Because you owe it to your Human half?" Kirk could not help asking, a little bitterly.

"No, Mr. Kirk," replied the quiet voice with a strange hint of sadness, "because any being is entitled to respect and dignity."

Kirk stared into the dark eyes, taken aback, and watched his Captain leave for the bridge, then followed him a few steps behind. He had to think, to clear the turmoil of his mind... And why was this Vulcan so unexpectedly different from what he had imagined? I thought it would be easy to hate him, he reflected in dismay, and instead, I... I... admire him? Why should I? He is an alien! But he is also a... good Captain? No that is not proven yet, and I must avoid such a line of thinking or I'll find my task impossible. The Humans count on me and I won't disappoint them for an alien - it would be monstrous!

After his spell of duty, Kirk transferred his thoughts to his personal log and added:

"I saw no evidence of any use of mental powers, apart from the doctor, perhaps... Although the Captain's eyes are so penetrating that it makes me wonder if he reads my thoughts at times! And..." He was interrupted by the door buzzer, and Scotty entered.

"Mr. Kirk, I'm sorry I did not welcome you earlier. I look forward to a Human First Officer aboard this vessel, I can tell you! Then a Human Captain..."

"Thank you, Mr. Scott," smiled Kirk, "but that hasn't happened yet!"

"It will. You are the man to do it and show those Vulcans a thing or two! Were you warned never to touch a Vulcan under any circumstances if you could help it?"

"No. Why?"

"McCoy should have told you! Because a Vulcan will sense your thoughts through the physical contact."

"Oh!... But Vulcans never touch..."

"No, for that very reason. Secretive as hell about their thoughts even among themselves! Tells a lot about all they have to hide!... Anyway, should you find it impossible to avoid contact, take care what you are thinking at the time. Must go, good luck!"

So that's why the Captain didn't shake hands when I arrived, reflected Kirk, and it indicates a respect for my thoughts I was not led to believe in from the tales I heard on Earth... Wish I knew more about the telepathic angle, it's rather difficult to fight a threat you can't see!

Kirk set out to achieve his goal of becoming First Officer with a fierce determination. Most of his spare time was spent studying the ship or observing the work in different sections, and he was surprised to get all his questions answered by the Vulcan officers, and any help he asked for readily given. Captain's orders? The Vulcans were intelligent enough to guess his purpose, and he knew from personal experience that Human officers in their position would have helped as little as possible.

Vulcan-Human relations were not very friendly, but then with people who showed no emotion... The Humans barely hid their resentment at obeying Vulcan orders, and the Vulcans themselves showed a lack of trust towards the Humans by the constant checking they carried out. Flare-ups were not all that frequent, due to the lack of emotion of the Vulcans. Had any other alien race been involved, Kirk doubted that peace would have prevailed for long. The Captain of course was quick to enforce discipline and nothing escaped his notice, which made him greatly feared by the Humans.

Kirk also observed the Captain who seemed to be everywhere and see everything and tried to discover if Spock had any particular Vulcan friend he might favour as First Officer. But he was completely unable to guess.

The Captain remained aloof and apart from everyone, Vulcan or Human, and if appearances were true, Kirk wondered how he could put up with such loneliness. Questions about Spock were readily answered by the Vulcan officers, and Kirk learned how his Captain was a brilliant scientist even by Vulcan standards, and had in fact worked on the design of the Enterprise's computers. He also learned how his family was among the highest and most distinguished on Vulcan, quite apart from his father's high rank in Starfleet.

Perhaps it explained why the Vulcan officers showed such deference to him, and why the Humans called him 'His Lordship', unconsciously recognising the aristocratic quality and elegance of their Captain, even by a derisive term. I'm becoming obsessed by him! thought Kirk with anger, it won't do at all! A Vulcan won't stop me! I'll ask for tapes on Vulcan history and customs, I must learn more about these people if I'm to beat them! Will the Captain agree to give me the tapes, though?

When his next off-duty spell came, Kirk went to Spock's quarters with determination, knowing the Captain was off duty, and buzzed.

"Come," said the quiet voice.

Kirk entered and took care to stand at attention and salute.

"At ease, Mr. Kirk," said Spock. "Sit down, I'll be with you in two minutes, when I have finished this calculation."

"Yes, sir," replied Kirk, glad of the delay. It allowed him to observe the austere quarters where the only signs of leisure activities were a chess set and a lyre. The Captain rarely played chess, though; no-one was good enough to give him a reasonably even game. Kirk had been told that he was a good musician, but he had never heard the sound of the Vulcan lyre.

"What is the purpose of your visit, Mr. Kirk?"

Spock's voice startled him and he gathered his wits. "Captain, I would like to borrow some tapes on Vulcan history and customs, if you have... I mean, if it is allowed."

"May I ask for what purpose?"

"I never met any Vulcans before my posting here, sir. All I knew previously was what I heard from other Humans."

"And I can guess most of it. A race who ostracised my mother for marrying a Vulcan shows regrettable intolerance."

"But I should have thought... that your father would have been blamed..."

"He was; so much so that he barely escaped assassination."

"I don't believe it!" exclaimed Kirk.

"I am not in the habit of lying, Mr. Kirk," stated Spock freezingly.

"No... no, I'm sorry, Captain, it was a shock. If he was blamed, your mother..."

"Refused to let Earth people believe that she had been enslaved by 'evil mental powers' and claimed full responsibility for her decision to marry a Vulcan. Hence her permanent exile from her native planet."

"I didn't know," murmured Kirk, his mind in a turmoil of conflicting thoughts again.

"You may have the tapes, Mr. Kirk. It is logical that you should wish to learn more about your fellow officers, and I cannot help wishing that more of your people also showed some desire to learn facts."

Kirk took the couple of tapes handed to him and said with some hesitation, "I can understand your choice of Vulcan, sir, it was the only possible choice for you."

"Indeed? I was considered Human for quite a while before I proved... But my personal history is irrelevant. You may leave now, Mr. Kirk, and I will answer any questions you may have about the tapes."

Kirk saluted and left, glad to take refuge in his quarters; he had much to think about!

And he would have liked to hear more about his Captain's past. What kind of a life was it for a child considered Human among Vulcans? Not easy, at a guess. How hard had it been for Spock to prove himself a Vulcan? Again not easy, he guessed. And yet Spock had done it and clearly earned the respect and esteem of the Vulcans, but at what price? Solitude? Self-reliance at all times?

"That's enough!" exclaimed Kirk aloud, suddenly angry. "That Vulcan is interesting me too much for my own good! I want his job - and I'll have it, even if he's a saint!"

But he looked at the tapes nevertheless, one about Vulcan history, the other about Vulcan beliefs and customs, and he understood the meaning of the IDIC symbol at last - not that it helped! He found it difficult again to put some order into his thoughts.

Of course, those tapes were made by Vulcans, so they were prejudiced, as any tape about Humans made by Humans would be in favour of Humans... yet the Vulcans' past history was horrifying and not hidden...

Instinctively, Kirk kept quiet about having borrowed the tapes and gave them back to Spock, who asked, "Any questions, Mr. Kirk?"

"No, Captain, none," replied Kirk drily.

The dark eyes looking into his were not so cold for once, or was it his imagination? "No, there would not be," agreed Spock. "It is too soon... You are at liberty to reject the veracity of those tapes, Mr. Kirk. However, bear them in mind if you can; they might prove their veracity or fallacy in the future."

"He guessed!" muttered Kirk to himself on his way back to his quarters, "and did not expect me to accept those tapes as truth just like that! This means he has some humanity in him to understand such a Human trait... or am I wrong, and he simply used his logic?"

He sat down at his desk and banged his fist on the table. "I must stop this obsession with the Captain or I'll find myself liking him next! Why... why do I feel so drawn to that particular Vulcan? He's an alien, I'm Human, and Humans are my friends! Not that I have many, not more than one, really,

but... he has none!" Why Kirk felt sure of that he could not tell, and he rejected the thought resolutely. "That's his affair! I've enough problems of my own without concerning myself with others'."

But, although he refused to admit it to himself, he knew that a corner of his mind held the picture of the tall, elegant and proud figure, aloof and dignified, whose determination perhaps surpassed his own. He refused to dwell on this; there were enough odds against him as it was. Being the youngest senior officer with the shortest service record, his turn at being First Officer was last, by which time the Captain would have probably chosen... He was not going to let that thought depress him, his turn was coming soon and he would make the most of the opportunity.

The routine task of star-charting the Enterprise was presently engaged upon was disrupted by sensor readings indicating the presence of several Klingon vessels ahead, and the Captain gave the order to retreat before detection, following Starfleet's orders to avoid incidents with the Klingons.

There was a state of unofficial war between the Federation and the Klingon Empire, and the Federation was anxious to avoid any intensification of the conflict unless it became absolutely necessary.

The Klingon vessels were slower and their sensors had a lesser range, giving Starfleet vessels an edge and often allowing them to avoid hostilities. When the Enterprise had reached a safe distance, the Captain reported to Starfleet and received orders to transfer the star-charting to another area nearby, the only one left in that quadrant of space.

The order was complied with. The first star they came to had a couple of planets, one of them inhabited, so a quick survey was required to assess its classification. The people appeared fairly civilised and clothing was so varied that Starfleet uniforms would not matter. As there was only one large city, clearly the capital, it was the obvious place to beam down to.

"You will beam down with me, Mr. Kirk," ordered Spock. "This is the first opportunity of testing your qualifications in planetary survey and classification. Mr. Sirak, you have the con."

Kirk followed the Captain to the transporter room where Spock handed him a communicator, but not a phaser. The use of these weapons was strictly prohibited for Humans.

They materialised just outside the city and Kirk looked forward to the change of work and conditions; but he soon changed his mind when they found themselves surrounded by Klingons within seconds, and before Spock had the slightest chance to use either communicator or phaser. These were confiscated. It very much looked as though they had been expected.

They were led to a small camp well hidden inside a wood, where a Klingon officer welcomed them with a laugh. "So you fell into the trap! Good!"

"Would you be good enough to clarify your statement?" asked Spock politely.

"By all means! A few of our vessels were awaiting a space ship and knew she would turn back and be re-directed to this area, the only one still unexplored in this quadrant."

"Your information is correct," agreed Spock.

"Which means they have spies in Federation territory, Captain," added Kirk.

"No, we have simply observed Starfleet tactics for quite a while. We guessed a survey group would beam down near this city and we surrounded it, without the natives even knowing. Your sensors didn't detect us because we're similar to them!"

"Have you any plans for this planet, sir?" asked Spock

"No, none at all, Captain... ?"

"Spock, sir. This is Lt. Commander Kirk."

"My name is Kwarth - Commander Kwarth. My mission is to obtain details of your vessel's specifications. We have had enough of Starfleet's tactics, detecting us first and then outrunning us."

"An understandable... 'tiredness'," Spock said blandly, "but why don't your government have talks with the Federation? It was offered several times."

"We do not talk, Captain Spock; we act, and we take what we want. I want your secrets. I'm glad you have a Human officer. He'll be easy to get the information from. Humans are soft and worthless. Get the mindsifter ready!" he ordered his officers, and a couple of them left to carry out the order. Kirk had paled and dug his nails into his palms to betray nothing of his horror. He knew of the Klingon Mindsifter, and no Human had a chance. He would not only tell everything he knew, but finish insane... Spock naturally knew and had to prevent this, and Starfleet orders were specific for such an occurrence; kill the Human! So he had no future either way.

The one small consolation was that the Vulcan way of execution was swift and painless, a very minor consolation for an ambitious young man with dreams of commanding a Starship! He had not even had his turn yet at being First Officer.

He met the Captain's eyes and wondered at the fleeting, odd expression in them. Pity? He was having none of that, and had his pride just as much as that Vulcan had!

"Get it over with, Captain," he muttered. "The quicker the better!"

But Spock turned to Kwarth. "Commander, you stated yourself that Humans were soft and worthless. Do you expect Starfleet to entrust highly valuable information to soft and worthless people?"

"You mean he doesn't know?" exclaimed the Klingon, with some disbelief.

"Of course not!" replied Spock, managing to convey a hint of disdain. "Your spying network is efficient enough to have told you that Humans are an inferior species not allowed any responsible position."

"That's true enough," admitted Kwarth.

"Therefore," continued Spock, "it is logical to assume that priceless information would not be entrusted to them either."

"But he is an officer..."

"Does he have to know much to operate controls?"

"I see... But why tell me this, Captain" It means you are the one who will be submitted to the Mindsifter..."

"The result would have been identical, Commander. The Human could not have told you, therefore I would have been subjected to the Mindsifter eventually. To kill even a Human for no reason is an illogical waste."

"Hmmm... I have heard about you Vulcans and your obsession with logic! Very well, take the Vulcan to the Mindsifter," he ordered a couple of guards.

Two large Klingons advanced to seize the Captain who said calmly, "If you would show me the way, there is no need for violence."

"Do as he says," instructed Kwarth. "If he is a sheep, so much the better! Put the Human in that cage for the moment, I'll decide what to do about him later."

Kirk was pushed into a small half-demolished building where the Klingons had put metal bars to replace the one missing wall, making it an efficient prison. He sat in a corner still dazed by that so narrow escape from insanity

or death, and unable to face yet any possible reason as to why the Captain... From what he remembered, Vulcans could resist the Mind-sifter, but it was only a fifty-fifty chance depending on their strength, and a hellishly painful process for them if the machine was used at maximum power. Kwarth would not hesitate to do that!

He shook the iron bars in a sudden rage, but they stood firm and the Klingon guard left his camp fire to come and slash his knuckles painfully as a result, then walked back to his post.

Kirk paced up and down trying feverishly to think of a way of escape to help his Captain, but a thorough survey of his prison revealed no way out. A trick call for help pretending to be ill only brought another vicious slash from the guard's whip, and he did not bother to enter.



Would the ship try to trace them? Not yet, there had not been enough time for anyone to start to worry... And the initiative of contact during a survey of an unclassified planet was usually left to the landing party...

He heard footsteps at last and saw the Captain walking towards the prison between two guards and followed by Kwarth whose face radiated fury. The guard opened the door and Spock entered; the door was locked again. Kirk was relieved to see that the Vulcan seemed all right as Kwarth shouted, "I've not finished with you, Captain, and would not have stopped had your sanity and life not been threatened. I want you alive and sane... We'll have another session tomorrow morning." He left with his aides and the guard went back to his fire.

Only then did Spock collapse without a sound.

"Captain!"

Kirk ran to him, only to hear the sharp order, "Don't touch me!"

"Captain... I want to help you!" protested Kirk, worried by the drawn features and uneven breathing of the Vulcan whose face contracted in a spasm of pain from time to time.

"You can't help me," gasped Spock, clearly speaking with an effort, "and it would hurt you to touch me."

"Why?"

"You would feel my pain. I cannot... put my shield up... yet."

"Can't I do anything?" he asked frantically. Then he noted the green stains appearing on the yellow shirt and exclaimed, "Did they use physical torture as well?"

"Yes, to weaken me."

"Whipping? Burning?"

"Both."

Kirk went to an old stone trough in the corner which was full of water, tore his shirt off and soaked it with water, then came back and applied the cold compress to his Captain's chest. With great care, he removed Spock's shirt and was able to apply more cold water, muttering curses against barbarians. Inadvertently, he touched the Vulcan and dropped the compress to clutch his head, which felt as though a knife had plunged into his brain, but it did not last more than a few seconds. It had been long enough however to enable him

to realise the suffering the Vulcan was going through; and yet very little could be read on the drawn features.

"Captain, can't I help you?" begged Kirk.

"It will be dark soon... Try to escape and save yourself. Sooner or later, the ship..."

"What about you?"

"I could not... Illogical..."

"And you expect me to leave you? After... Do you think so little of me, Captain?"

"Irrelevant... I can make it an order..."

Spock turned to the wall to hide the sudden contraction of his features and put his hand to his face. Kirk was not deceived. If only he could touch him, comfort him... Trust Vulcans to have to be so different that normal Human ways could not apply for such a simple thing as comfort...

"What will happen to you tomorrow, Captain" Can you survive the Mind-sifter?"

"Unknown, but I'll let myself die... if necessary. There is nothing you can do here... so it is logical that you should escape if you can."

Kirk ignored the words, trying to put a name to what he had sensed mingled with the Vulcan's pain. There had been a fleeting something... a reaching for help? Yes, that was it! Then it was possible...

"Captain," he said fiercely, "I want the truth. How can I help you?"

"You can't."

"I can! When I touched you, I sensed that there was a possibility..."

"A Vulcan could; not you..."

"How?"

Spock was too worn to argue further. "By taking some of my pain," he admitted quietly. "The level would then become tolerable."

"Then I'll do that."

"No. It could injure your mind."

"Far less than that Klingon thing!"

"And I could sense your thoughts..."

"Who cares?" exclaimed Kirk in his anxiety, and indeed at that moment he didn't care. "You may be stubborn, Captain, but I am stubborn too!"

"Because you are overcome by emotion, Mr. Kirk... Humans fear telepathy, and you must have heard the wild tales applied... to us... I am alien to you and the colour of my blood proves it."

Kirk glanced at his hands stained with green and a sudden vivid memory of those tales sprang into his mind, but the memory of the suffering he had felt erased it. He looked at the Vulcan who had not only saved him from torture and death but was now refusing any help in order not to hurt him, and knew that despite himself a tie was being forged between him and that alien, regardless of the colour of his blood.

"Captain," he said softly, "it is my duty to help you - quite apart from the fact that I want to do it, even if I have to force you to accept." Resolutely, he put his hands on Spock's face, glad the Vulcan could not resist, and hung on regardless of the searing pain invading his mind. Biting his lips until they bled, he fought the agony inside him, careful not to let it get back to his Captain. He had no idea how long it lasted. He kept catching

glimpses from the Vulcan's mind but ~~was~~ unable to take much notice. At last he sensed Spock's relief from the excessive suffering; he had done it!

His hands were taken off his Captain's face and he found himself hanging on to the Vulcan in order not to pass out. Wasn't there that thing... about not touching? To hell with it!

Kind hands were now on his face and his mind was being soothed by a delicate contact, full of care and tangible gentleness.

"Thank you for your assistance," said a voice which sounded a little softer than usual. "I hope you don't mind if I help you in turn, Mr. Kirk."

"My name is Jim," murmured Kirk dreamily, enjoying the gentle contact but unable to assimilate all he was discovering about the meld at the moment. **But he knew he would remember** and everything would make sense. Why did Humans so fear this? He found himself wishing that the presence in his mind would stay there, never leave...

"Jim..." repeated Spock, as though to try the name on his tongue. "I have to agree that formality seems superfluous in our predicament. You feel better now: I'll withdraw..."

"Must you?" asked Kirk with visible regret.

"Our situation is dangerous and we should attempt to escape while darkness..."

"Yes, Captain - I'm sorry, I forgot for a moment... Those horrible Klingons! I'm quite willing to show them a thing or two!" assured Kirk with typical Human enthusiasm.

He was not sure, but he could have sworn a smile had made the Captain's lips twitch for a second. "It would be preferable to avoid attention. But first let us see if we can move those bars."

Vulcan strength probably could, too! But the Captain was below par and in spite of their joint efforts, the iron bars did not give way. Before they had time to think of any other means of escape, fate played into their hands as the Klingon guard approached with a tray of food and opened the door.

"The Captain has to eat so that he is strong tomorrow - Commander's orders. You, Human, you will feed him. Make sure he eats everything."

The two prisoners exchanged a quick glance and Kirk protested forcefully, "Why should I care if he eats? He can starve as far as I'm concerned! If you want him to eat, feed him yourself!"

The Klingon hesitated, then sat by Spock, his weapon still in his right hand and his eyes on Kirk, while with his left hand he started feeding the Vulcan. He was obviously assuming the Captain too weak to attempt anything after a session with the Mindsifter, so it was easy for Spock to apply a neck pinch with success. The two prisoners hurriedly tied and gagged the Klingon, rolled him into a corner, and after taking his weapon, crept out of their jail and shut the door.

To get at the communicators was hopeless; it would involve searching the camp and considerably increase the odds in favour of recapture, so they had to abandon the idea and just run out into the countryside away from the city, firstly to avoid involving the natives and secondly because it would be easier for the Enterprise to trace them and pick them up if they were isolated. After a few kilometers, though, Spock nearly collapsed and Kirk had to support him, understanding that the temporary relief he had provided was probably wearing off and the Vulcan was keeping going through sheer will-power.

"Let's find a hiding-place, Captain, you need rest and so do I," he said tactfully.

Moonlight allowed them to discover a small natural cavern, the entrance of which was half-hidden by foliage. Kirk felt renewed worry; Spock did not look

well, from what he could see in the half-light, but the Vulcan had his shield up and little could be sensed of his pain.

"I'll attempt a contact with the ship through my mind," said the Captain after Kirk had helped him to sit up against the rocky wall of the cavern. "I don't believe the regulation time before a search is started has elapsed."

Kirk nodded and watched him with concern; was he strong enough? But they had few alternatives - if any!

Spock concentrated hard, so hard that perspiration appeared on his face and his breathing became ragged.

"Captain, please stop!" begged Kirk, shaking his shoulder.

The Vulcan slumped against him and murmured, "My mind is too weak, I can't do it."

Gently, Kirk made him lie down. No wonder he could not, after... Finding a hollowed piece of bark, he dipped it in a nearby stream and made the Captain drink, then ran some water over his chest to help with the burns.

"Is that better?"

"Yes... thank you... You should go on... in case the Klingons find us. I can't ... I would be a hindrance... "

"And you think I would abandon my Captain to save my own skin?" asked Kirk, with real anger.

"I was afraid... you would not..." replied Spock with the smallest hint of a smile.

Kirk smiled back and suggested, "Try to sleep, Captain, wouldn't that be best?"

"Yes. I could try again to contact the ship then."

He shut his eyes and his exhaustion was such that he fell into a light sleep. Kirk made him as comfortable as he could, and noticed that his hands were icy. Vulcans did feel the cold more than Humans... After clearing the entrance of foliage so that he could see outside, Kirk lay alongside him in order to provide some warmth and keep a watch, clasping the stolen weapon firmly. God help any Klingon trying to harm his Captain!

A smile played on his lips at the thought that if anyone had told him that one day he would care enough about a Vulcan to go to such lengths, he would never have believed it. He refused to think about the implications for the present and kept a sharp eye and ear for any sound, but none came. Spock woke after about an hour.

"Feeling better, Captain?"

"Yes, thank you, Mr... Jim." Kirk knew with certainty that he had never felt such pleasure at hearing someone call him by his first name before.

"I hope you don't mind, I know you don't like physical contact, but I had to keep you warm... "

"Logical," agreed Spock, "and I do not believe it matters between... friends?" The last word was uttered timidly, in a very uncertain manner quite untypical of the Captain, while the dark eyes suddenly had a vulnerable look which moved Kirk to the core.

"I'm honoured that you should think of me in that way, Captain," replied Kirk, his voice unsteady, but giving his warm smile.

The Vulcan's eyes lit up in an answering smile that Kirk watched in wonder as Spock replied, "I am the one who is honoured, Jim. Through you I have suddenly discovered the meaning of many things... "

"We have both discovered new things, Captain, as for instance the fact

that red and green are not necessarily opposites?"

Spock nodded, and was going to attempt another contact with the Enterprise when the familiar hum of the transporter was heard and they were aboard in a second.

Kirk was glad to see Dr. Syvik and a medical team standing by. "The Captain is hurt, Doctor," he explained unnecessarily as he helped to lay the Vulcan on the mobile bed.

Dr. Syvik was holding a hypo but Spock stopped the injection. "Just a moment Doctor. Mr. Sirak, is everything in order aboard?"

"Yes, Captain, and I regret that we did not trace you before... "

"You could not have known of the presence of Klingons on that world. Report to Starfleet immediately and leave this quadrant, a Klingon vessel will arrive sooner or later to pick up their landing party."

"Yes, sir."

"I believe Mr. Kirk is to take over from you as First Officer shortly."

"Yes, Captain."

"He should have a medical check-up first, in case he was affected... " But Dr. Syvik waited no longer to administer the hypo and Spock sank into unconsciousness.

"Doctor, he might have had orders to give me," protested Kirk, "before I take over... "

"The Captain was in no condition to continue, Mr. Kirk, and it is the duty of the First Officer to take over completely in such conditions. Make your report to Starfleet with Mr. Sirak, then join me in sickbay for the check-up in a couple of hours before you take over as First Officer."

Kirk complied and the report was sent off to Starfleet after orders to leave orbit and withdraw from the quadrant had been obeyed. He then gave an account of events to the Vulcan senior officers and was pleased when they accepted his account without question; although the Captain would confirm, so lying would have been pointless, might have been why they accepted his statement and not because they trusted him...

Kirk duly reported to Dr. Syvik for his check-up and was glad to hear that the Captain was in no danger and would be fit again in a few days. But he did not care for Dr. Syvik's questions when the Vulcan physician queried Spock's reason for ordering the check-up and, after Kirk's brief account of events, asked about the mind meld.

"Do you expect me to tell you what I saw of the Captain's mind?" asked an indignant Kirk.

"No, Mr. Kirk, no-one has the right to ask such a question, but I am glad to see that you understand the ethics involved. What I must do is run a test on your mind to ensure that no damage, however slight, occurred. Brains, be they Human or Vulcan, are delicate mechanisms, and telepathy is not normal practice for a Human mind."

"All right, Doctor, get on with it."

"It will not involve any telepathy."

Reassured - he trusted Spock but still felt a little uncertain about the other Vulcans - Kirk submitted graciously enough, glad to hear the verdict, "You suffered no ill-effects, Mr. Kirk, your mind is remarkably strong for a Human. However, I would recommend a rest period of six hours before you take up your duties."

Kirk had to admit that he could do with the rest and went back to his quarters. En route, he was waylaid by McCoy.

"So your turn as First Officer has come, Jim! Good! See that you stay with it. Not long to Captain after that!"

"What?" asked a startled Kirk.

"What's the matter, Jim? Are you all right?"

"Yes, yes, Bones, just tired." And he needed time to think!

"Sorry - yes, you do look as though you need a rest. Good luck!"

Kirk watched him go, and entered his quarters feeling rather dazed. He had completely forgotten his ambition to become a Captain! Reality had now caught up with him, a reality he no longer cared for...

He lay on his bed and confided his thoughts to his personal log.

"It seems I may be in a mess! The Human Plan I'm a key of no longer interests me in the slightest, and if anyone had told me that becoming a Starship Captain would one day seem unimportant to me... but then I never cared for any of my previous Captains, and none of them ever saw me as a person... After what we went through on that awful planet, and after what the Captain and I discovered about each other, I could not betray him, never! He is my Captain, and I feel proud that he thinks of me as a friend, the one friend who might relieve his loneliness at last. That mind meld was a wonderful experience, one I'll never forget, and yes, I look forward to others. How stupid Humans are to fear Vulcan mental powers! I'm sure no Human aboard suspects how gentle their Captain really is, and that he cares for them, wants to help them. It is difficult to believe that the day has come when I am choosing a Vulcan in preference to Humans, and it will probably make me a traitor in Human eyes, but my mind is made up; I'll never betray my Captain - my friend - even if I have to die to prove it."

Tiredness overcame him and he fell asleep, after setting the alarm to wake him in good time. His sleep was rather agitated though, there was something in the back of his mind bothering him, and he woke up well before he had to go on duty and take up his duties as First Officer. Just when I needed the rest, he thought... The nagging thought suddenly struck him. The mind meld! The Captain must have seen... Horrified, Kirk ran to sickbay, where Dr. Syvik granted him permission to see Spock for a limited period when assured that it was very important.

The Vulcan looked pale and his features were still drawn, but the dark eyes welcomed him. "Problems, Mr. Kirk?"

"No, Captain, at least... I'm sorry to bother you when you're not well, but I should have no right to my turn as First Officer."

"Do you mean because of the Human Plan?"

"You do know then. I'm not proud of myself, Captain, and will resign if... "

"Illogical, Mr. Kirk. What is wrong with wanting to be Starship Captain? I had that same ambition."

"Maybe, but you didn't join any unlawful association and ... "

"There was no need: I had no law in my way, Mr. Kirk."

"No, that's true, and yet you became a scientist first... "

"I was always attracted to scientific subjects, and found them an aid in becoming truly Vulcan, hence my decision to be a scientist before joining Starfleet as my father wished. He did not understand that need I had, to follow my own decision at the time, hence my long rift with him, but he relented when I became engaged on the design of the Enterprise computers, and my rapid promotion in Starfleet also helped, of course."

Kirk was listening with great attention, pleased that Spock should talk

about himself for once, when the sight of Dr. Syvik signalling brought him back to reality. "I must go, Captain. Are you sure...?"

"Go and take up your post as temporary First Officer, Jim," assured Spock with the half-smile Kirk appreciated the more because it was so rare. "The past has no importance unless we let it intrude."

"I... yes - that's logical," smiled Kirk. "Thank you for your trust, Captain; may I never betray it."

"You won't. But take care, the Humans want you for their Plan."

"I'll have to hide my change of mind, and if I could only discover just what is planned, in order to foil it... But that's my problem, Captain. Get better quickly, we need you on the bridge."

Making sure he was impeccable, as befitted a First Officer, Kirk took up his new function with the determination to keep the ship up to a high standard during the Captain's illness, it was the least he could do and he set to it with all his ability. He loved the Enterprise, she was a beautiful ship, but he no longer thought of her as the ship that might one day be his, but as his Captain's ship, and his Captain was worthy of her and worthy of his loyalty and full commitment. To hell with the Plan, whatever it was!

The doctor kept Spock in sickbay for five days, and during that time Kirk hardly took any rest and started a few innovations, like an instruction to the heads of sections to administer reprimands and punishments themselves - something they had previously done only rarely, and only when the Captain was fully occupied - unless it was very grave.

"Why make the Captain a bogey man?" he asked the senior officers assembled in the briefing room.

"Bogey man? What is... The Captain is not..." began Mr. Salyk.

"What I mean is that he should not be the one to punish always, it places an unfair burden on him which should be shared by us all."

"Logical, Mr. Kirk," agreed Sirak, "but where Humans are concerned, he knows better than we do which punishment is justifiable... We tend to fear impairing relations between our two races."

"I'm sure the Captain knows best," agreed Kirk, "but isn't it about time you learned? Humans are not exactly fragile and can stand up to hard discipline and punishment. Mistakes will occur, but if you learn from them... The Humans only have to do their job well, then they needn't fear punishment, so it is really up to them." Kirk stopped, a little afraid of having gone too far. Here he was, the youngest officer, telling everyone what they should do! Just as well Vulcans did not take offence easily and would consider a subject without emotion. With the thought came the realisation of how far his attitude had changed in a few short days.

"I agree with you, Mr. Kirk," stated Salyk at last. "The Captain should have more help, and I for one am ready to give it."

The other officers agreed, and Sirak added, with the honesty Kirk was starting to appreciate in Vulcans, "I must admit that I'm not sure how to deal with Human faults, Mr. Kirk. At times, they seem... illogical to us, to say the least. May I perhaps consult you to avoid bothering the Captain?"

"I'll be pleased to help and advise any of you at any time," assured Kirk, "and will in turn consult one of you should a Vulcan be involved; I would be the one in need of advice then. I can assure you that I want Humans to perform as well as Vulcans in a similar job, so I will not be soft with anyone."

There was another matter he wanted to ask about, but should he wait until the Captain was back? On the other hand, there might be no harm in mentioning

it now. "I could not help noticing the frequency of the checks you do on the Humans' work, and I meant to ask the Captain. It tends to anger the Humans and shows lack of confidence in their ability."

"Which they resent," finished Senak, the chief engineer. "There is a perfectly logical reason, Mr. Kirk, and we are acting on the Captain's specific orders. The ship had a full Vulcan crew aboard while on trial flights, and many of us stayed aboard, but the Humans are all new and need time to master the work fully. So on all major tasks, we do a thorough checking, but the Captain has already instructed us to relax this rule as and when the Humans show more proficiency."

"I see. The Captain was right, of course."

"He probably did not tell you because he was confident that you would know how to deal with Humans," added Salyk.

"It makes sense, and I'm sorry I mentioned the matter. I should have known..."

"It is true however that we find it difficult to trust Humans," admitted Sirak, "and we hope to remedy this as soon as possible."

"I never noticed any mistrust, Mr. Sirak. Whenever I worked with you, it was on an equal basis."

"It would have been most illogical of me to show any private reservation I may or may not have had about your appointment, Mr. Kirk," replied the Vulcan evenly. "Your ability was the only thing I had the right to judge."

Kirk smiled and dismissed the assembly, but that last remark had brought home to him how difficult it was for Humans to understand Vulcans, when they showed nothing of how they felt. Humans usually showed plenty!

That evening he received a visit from Sulu, and knew he had to be careful, especially when he was asked why he had not escaped and let the Klingons kill the Captain. But Kirk had an answer ready.

"What good would it have done? Starfleet would have sent another Captain since the ship does not have a permanent First Officer yet, so it would not have helped us. The fact that I helped the Captain can only count in my favour when the time for promotion comes."

"Of course - sorry, Mr. Kirk, I did not think... But you must be appointed First Officer for the Plan to work."

"Can't I be told yet what that famous Plan is?"

"Plenty of time for that yet. It is good policy to appear friendly towards the Vulcans to win their confidence, so go ahead, Mr. Kirk, be as friendly as you can to improve your chances of being promoted. I'm sorry I have to give you such an unpleasant instruction..."

Kirk watched him leave with a hidden smile. He would take great pleasure in following those instructions!

Spock, once released from sickbay, was confined to quarters for a day, and Kirk buzzed his door that evening with a little hesitation and entered at his Captain's invitation.

The Vulcan was sitting up in bed, and welcomed him with the half smile he seemed to reserve for Kirk.

"Should you want to rest, Captain, I'll leave. I had no specific purpose..."

"No, I'm fit now and only humouring the Doctor. I was going to play,

would you like to...?"

"Oh yes, with pleasure."

Kirk handed him the lyre and sat back to listen, watching the Vulcan's absorption in the music and soon becoming lost in the soft harmony of the notes. There was emotion there, he could feel it, and yet there was also an austere and calm flow which made a perfect pattern. Truly a half-Human and half-Vulcan music!

"It's beautiful, Captain, and I no longer wonder at the comments I heard about your playing."

"Few people have heard me play like this. It is not Vulcan music, neither is it Earth music. It is my own, the music of nowhere." There was no bitterness behind the words, but Kirk knew from the mind meld all the hurt and past anguish they covered.

"It is also the music of two races, Captain, don't you see? A music both Humans and Vulcans can understand, and it means that the two can mix to produce beauty and achieve harmony."

Spock was looking at him strangely, and Kirk felt embarrassed. Had he said too much? The next words reassured him.

"That is how my father defined my music also, Jim. It means that both races can understand, as your reaction was similar to a Vulcan's."

Kirk smiled, relieved. The Captain had not caught the implication; he had thought of the Vulcan Spock and the Human Kirk. He was wrong. The Vulcan understood.

"The thought behind your words was most gratifying, and I thank you, Jim."

"Whoever said that Vulcans don't understand Humans?" exclaimed Kirk. "And when it comes to a Vulcan-Human combination, both races had better watch out! But I'll let you rest now, Captain, and look forward to seeing you on duty tomorrow."

On his way to his cabin he met McCoy, who asked bluntly, "Jim, is anything wrong?"

"No. Why?"

"I'm not sure... Why didn't you tell me all about your adventures with His Lordship and the Klingons?"

"Sorry, Bones, but I was busy... "

"Being First Officer! I'll forgive you, Jim, you're doing a fine job; even the Vulcans seem to accept you! Can't have been easy. Shame His Lordship will be back tomorrow. Still, you run a good ship, he'll have to see that!"

And I do it for his sake, not mine, thought Kirk with a smile as he retired for the night.

The next day, he gave a full report to the Captain in the briefing room with all senior officers present. After advising Spock of Starfleet orders for their next mission, a check up on a distant colony which was purely routine, Kirk outlined his new ideas and hoped his innovations would be approved, but he was ready to accept their rejection should the Captain disapprove. Spock listened carefully, then asked the other officers to report on the new measures, after which he ratified them and congratulated Kirk on them. The Human felt seven feet tall, knowing that the words were genuine and had nothing to do with their friendship, and his Captain was appreciating the help he was able to give in commanding a mixed crew.

The routine visit to the distant colony turned out not to be routine, because the colonists, all from Earth, had discovered the existence of natives who lived far underground, but occasionally came up to the surface, and some conflict had developed. It was logical to send an Earth team to re-establish peace if possible, the colony being well-known for resenting Vulcans, so Kirk beamed down with McCoy, Scotty and a couple of crewmen and invited the two opposing parties to a 'peace conference', as he grandly called it. He had to spend some time convincing the natives he was not automatically on Earth's side, and more time to work out a peace settlement which could work, but with patience and tenacity and the knowledge he had of Human traits, he managed to leave behind him a tranquil world.

Spock congratulated him, and sent a report accordingly to Starfleet, in which he resolutely refused to mention the numerous calls Kirk had made to him for advice or confirmation of his own ideas. "I asked you to keep in contact, Mr. Kirk, and to discuss a problem or anything else with a fellow officer hardly diminishes your achievement. You were the one there, who had to take the final decision."

"Logical, I suppose," smiled Kirk.

"The exact word, Mr. Kirk," agreed Spock, with his usual calm.

Those difficult negotiations occurred during Kirk's fourth week as First Officer, and with one week left, he concentrated on making sure Humans respected discipline as much as any Vulcan, and showed clearly that as far as he was concerned, he had no use for Humans if they were lazy, insolent, or took no interest in their work. He suspected that he got away with it because the Humans thought he was working for the Plan.

On the evening before the end of his five weeks' temporary nomination, the Captain called him to his quarters. Kirk obeyed the summons and saluted most correctly, never taking advantage of their friendship not to observe discipline.

"You wanted me, Captain?"

"At ease. Sit down, Mr. Kirk. This is a formal interview to advise you that I'm in the process of applying to my father for the special permission necessary to appoint you as First Officer. Until your appointment is ratified, you will therefore remain acting First Officer."

There was a time when Kirk would have been delighted at the news, but now he felt dismay. "Captain, you mustn't!" he protested vehemently. "The Humans' Plan requires my promotion to First Officer, so they'll be able to put it into operation; it's playing into their hands!"

"Be that as it may, Mr. Kirk, it would be contrary to all justice to deny you promotion on those grounds. I'm aware however that your position could become dangerous if and when you become expected to follow that Plan."

"If only I knew what it is! I'll have to hide my true feelings and find out. I'd rather know, though, if any thought of murdering you were in the air."

"I have not yet sent the appropriate papers in to my father, so you could refuse. Let me emphasise that you earned the promotion through merit and ability alone, our friendship did not enter into it."

"Thank you for saying it, Captain, although I didn't think you'd..."

"You proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that you could share the responsibility of command, or replace me if necessary and take command decisions. The report on those difficult negotiations will no doubt help Starfleet to decide to approve my recommendation. Also, my father trusts my judgement."

Kirk nodded thoughtfully, his mind pondering the situation, and Spock remained silent, respecting his private deliberation. "I'll accept the promotion, Captain," said Kirk at last, "and thank you for waiting so patiently. I want to know that famous Plan and be in a position to foil it. But the

Vulcans - is it fair to them?"

"To have a Human First Officer? The Humans have a Vulcan Captain. Do you expect me to believe that my officers cannot accept orders from a Human I trust?"

"I hope you are right, Captain. I must admit I do not feel all that sure of myself when I have to handle Vulcans..."

"You did very well up to now," assured Spock, "and the Humans respond to you. My ship can only benefit from your promotion."

"In that case I have no hesitation in accepting, Captain, and I thank you for your confidence."

"I'm sure it is not misplaced, Jim," said Spock, and the softening of his dark eyes for a brief instant made Kirk smile warmly as he left.

Elation did take hold of him once back in his cabin. He was to be Commander and First Officer! Probably the youngest in the fleet, the one who had achieved it quickest, with perhaps the exception of the Captain, and in spite of the drawback of his race. The Enterprise became his ship to a certain extent, as he would replace the Captain and assume command at times. But she would always remain his Captain's ship, he would see to that, and he felt privileged to have earned such a position of trust. Switching his personal log on, he said,

"I can imagine the joy of the Humans when they think that the first part of their Plan has succeeded! Little do they know that I am making it my business to ensure failure of the second part! I can't say I like the role I now have to play, and I bet that is why the Captain gave me the chance to refuse promotion... but my choice is made, and I chose Vulcan - as he did. Perhaps an exaggeration, as I chose one Vulcan in preference to Humans... a crime against my people? My conscience says I had no other choice, and if Humans took the trouble to learn, to know aliens, they might discover what I discovered, that red and green are not necessarily opposites!

May I be able to protect my Captain at all times, even if the harm is threatened by my own race."

Kirk turned the recorder off with a sigh, and settled to sleep. He had to be rested to face the crew in a few hours as their probably permanent First Officer.

Next day, the announcement was made. The Humans were delighted and congratulated Kirk, who wished rather that he knew what the Vulcans thought! The senior officers also congratulated him, but the new First Officer was more familiar with Vulcans by now and was aware that his colleagues were too polite to show any resentment, if they had any. That was one of the times when he cursed the Vulcans' lack of emotion! But it was up to him to prove his worth to them, and his loyalty to the Captain, a challenge he welcomed and would win. It was about time aliens realised that some Humans were trustworthy!

He set out to follow the preliminaries to the Plan and deliberately mixed with Vulcans in the dining and recreation areas to study and perhaps learn to understand them better. He had to if he was to command them efficiently, and Spock approved when Kirk brought him some papers to sign.

"So you guessed my purpose?" smiled Kirk. "There are not that many activities I can share with Vulcans, though..." He eyed the three-dimensional chess set and hesitated.

"Do you play?" asked Spock.

"No, Captain, I never had time to learn."

"I'll teach you if you wish."

"But it'd be so dull for you!"

"I am not so sure, I never taught a Human before."

"I'll be pleased to give you that experience, Captain," grinned Kirk.

And so the sight of Spock and Kirk sitting on opposite sides of one of the recreation room chess sets became commonplace, and Vulcan officers often stopped to watch and give advice to Kirk if he seemed in a tight spot, not usually with success, though. The science officer, Mr. Salyk, also played, if not as brilliantly as the Captain, and offered supplementary practice to Kirk, who accepted readily.

The fact that he lost all games did not bother him. He was learning more than the game so popular on Vulcan. He was learning concentration, logic, and he was understanding more about the people who liked that pastime, so he persevered when he was assured the lessons bored no-one.

But Kirk could feel himself being watched, and it made him uneasy. The fact that it was the Humans, not the Vulcans, who made him uneasy seemed to him particularly ludicrous. In fact, he enjoyed the Vulcan officers' company and conversation, quite apart from the chess games, and the fact that he had to hide his feelings from Humans made him far more at ease with the Vulcans. Did the Humans notice? Detect his friendship with the Captain in spite of the strict formality they always maintained on duty? He doubted that they suspected that much. He had become important to the Party, so he was carefully watched; it made sense from a Human point of view.

One evening, after a particularly enjoyable game of chess with Spock where he had actually managed a draw, Kirk returned to his quarters and found McCoy waiting. This made him feel guilty, aware that he had avoided the doctor since the incident with the Klingons, afraid he would guess...

"Jim, have I offended you?"

"No, Bones, and I'm sorry, but I've been very busy, working hard most of the time..."

"I suppose you have to, but if you don't spend your time with your friends, you certainly spend it with aliens! Do you have to be that friendly with the Vulcans?"

"Wasn't I supposed to get into their good books?" queried Kirk.

"Yes, but no need to go that far! Scotty's reported that at times you behave with His Lordship as though you were long-lost brothers!"

"A gross exaggeration!" protested Kirk, sure that it was so.

"I do hope that is the case! Do you have to spend so much time with His Lordship?"

"Why do you call him that?" Kirk asked, exasperated.

"He's a Vulcan aristocrat for one, and the way he's always faultlessly dressed, with such impeccable and over-polite manners is enough to give you the creeps."

Kirk bit back a furious retort. He had been right to avoid McCoy! He counted to three and said mildly, "He's the Captain, and has to give a good example."

"I know, but all that crawling we have to do! I'd not mind to a Human Captain, but to a Vulcan..."

"Talking about that, isn't it time I was told something more about the Plan?" interrupted Kirk, glad of the chance to change the subject.

"Your promotion hasn't been ratified yet, but Sulu did instruct me to tell you this much - take advantage of any opportunity, should it arise, to take command of the ship."

"What kind of opportunity?" Kirk asked suspiciously.

"Anything, illness, accident... "

"Deliberately provoked?"

"No, Jim, that would be too risky, and until your promotion is definite, no action is to be taken. But you never know, fate could play into our hands, and if it does, make the most of it. I don't suppose we'll have that much luck, though." McCoy sighed, although Kirk felt a little relieved. At least there was no immediate danger of murder. It looked as though they might have more devious ideas in mind, though, and he did not like it one bit.

"Come and have a drink," McCoy invited. "We'll..." He was interrupted by the red alert signal, and Kirk was glad, for it meant the interview was over. Both men turned immediately to leave the cabin, but they had barely reached the door when the intercom bleeped.

"Mr. Kirk," said Spock's voice, "meet me in engineering, at the double."

"Yes, sir."

The scene in that sector was chaotic and several Vulcan officers and crew members of both races were fighting a raging inferno, the restricted space being a hindrance.

Spock arrived at the same time as Kirk and McCoy and it was Scotty who reported that one tube had exploded, wrecking a whole compartment.

"Any casualties?" asked Spock.

"Not as far as I know, Captain, but I haven't had time to count..."

"Captain," interrupted Mr. Senak, the Vulcan chief engineer, arriving at a run, "several men are trapped under the weight of a collapsed partition. It caused a fall of containers from the cargo hold and added weight to the wall."

"Can they be reached?" asked Spock.

"Only through the ventilation duct, sir. I'll get a team..."

"Hurry," ordered Spock. "I'll go now, follow when you are able to."

"I am with you, sir," said Kirk.

"Take care, Captain," warned Senak. "Section 17 is not safe with that fire..."

"We'll be careful," promised Spock, already half-way through the ventilation duct.

Kirk was going to follow when Scotty seized his arm and whispered, "Are they Vulcans or Humans trapped there?"

"Who cares? Let me go!" replied an indignant Kirk, shaking his arm free and following Spock's fast progress. Humans, really! At that moment, he felt ashamed of being Human. Did they expect him to let Vulcans die? And had Spock bothered to ask? How could he show them... But he had more pressing problems as he squeezed after his Captain. The heat was unbearable.

They thought themselves lucky to find no fire in the collapsed section and started moving containers and debris as fast as they could, Spock's Vulcan strength coming in most useful. The heat was abating and the intercom bleeped; that it was still working was a miracle.

"Captain, the fire is under control; we'll be with you in a few minutes."

"Good. Do not rush in many at a time, the floor is weakened."

"Captain," called Kirk, his voice awed, "how can we free them?"

Spock joined him; the mess of metal beams and twisted columns was appalling. They set to, soon helped by the fire fighters, and managed to get two crewmen out, but two more were pinned by a main structural beam in a small area



inaccessible to machinery or to many men, and the whole thing looked on the point of collapse.

Without hesitation, Spock squeezed into what space was available and tackled the large beam. "As soon as I lift, pull them out fast, Mr. Kirk."

Kirk nodded, cursing the restricted space which did not allow him to help, and Spock's gasps made him aware of how difficult his task was. Only a Vulcan probably had the strength... The beam shifted slightly, enough to move one man pinned by the arm, but the other had both legs under. Kirk watched, fascinated, as the beam lifted a little higher and higher until finally he could pull the man out and hand him over to the doctors.

He heard a heavy thud and a stifled cry behind him with horror.

"Spock!" he shouted, turning back and plunging into the narrow space where he grabbed the Vulcan whose white colour did not reassure him.

"It is my foot... I believe... Getting my boot off might free it..."

"Hurry, Mr. Kirk," warned Mr. Senak, "the rest of the beam will collapse any minute."

Kirk was fighting with the boot when Spock pushed him violently away. "Go, Jim, it is falling."

Kirk looked up and saw the metal beam slowly breaking off. Clenching his teeth and seizing Spock around the chest, he heaved as hard as he could, and both fell out of the danger zone as a crash deafened them.

Have I broken his foot? wondered Kirk with anguish as he clutched the Captain fiercely. "Spock, are you all right?"

"Yes... I did not have the strength to push you out of danger..."

"Thank God you did not, or you would be dead now!" Kirk stopped, suddenly conscious of the stares from the Humans present. He slowly detached himself from the Vulcan and helped to put him on a mobile bed. "His foot?" he asked the Vulcan physician who had already administered a pain-killer.

"Broken and partly crushed, Mr. Kirk, but only the main bone has a break, and it is a clean one, so there should be no problem. I'll have to keep the Captain in sickbay for at least three days, though."

"You are in charge, Mr. Kirk," said Spock with the slight smile Kirk knew was meant for him alone.

The First Officer set about putting the ship back into shape. Fortunately no major part had been affected, although they would need repairs. His fear that the accident was due to sabotage proved unfounded, to his relief as he listened attentively to the explanations from the chief engineer.

"Thank you, Mr. Senak. I am glad it was only an accident, not something worse."

"I don't understand, Mr. Kirk."

"Didn't sabotage occur to you as a possible cause?"

"It did, sir," admitted the Vulcan, "but I rejected it at once, and assumed an accident from the start. It is Captain Spock's policy and specific order never to let any member of the crew realise any suspicion on our part - unless it is absolutely proven, of course - so none of the Human engineers is aware that..."

"I see," Kirk said. "Don't you find it difficult with Humans sometimes?"

"In some cases, yes, sir. But how can we expect Humans to trust us if we don't trust them?"

"Logical," agreed Kirk with a smile, "and I wish Humans had more logic at

times... I wasn't being sarcastic!" he added hastily, relieved when the Vulcan assured him he had not thought he was.

But Kirk was conscious of very black looks from McCoy, Scotty and Sulu, to name but a few! So he avoided the Humans. Did they expect him to kill Spock? He was aware that their friendship had broken into the open in no uncertain terms, the way he had dropped the 'Captain' -- for the first time, too, he reflected -- and Spock had called him 'Jim' could leave no-one in any doubt. The Humans clearly thought he had gone too far. And the Vulcans?

As he sat in the command chair when engineering was more or less back into shape, the Vulcan navigator got up and approached him, saluting. "Mr. Kirk, the senior officers have asked me to convey to you their gratification. Our Captain is alive because you saved his life at the risk of your own. While to Vulcans this is a simple matter of loyalty, we know Humans are different and therefore behave differently. However, we see that Captain Spock was justified in recommending your promotion; your loyalty is similar to ours."

"Thank you, Mr. Sirak," replied Kirk, careful to keep emotion out of his voice, "I only did my duty in accordance with the oath I took to the Captain." The Vulcan nodded, fully understanding, and returned to his post as Kirk relaxed in the chair with a stifled sigh. Here he was on the best of terms with the Vulcan crew and out of step with the Humans! He was bound to hear their protests sooner or later, and it made him angry when he thought how the Captain had risked his life lifting that beam to save two Humans.

Satisfied that the routine was running smoothly again, Kirk was going to go and deal with some paperwork when Uhura called, "Mr. Kirk, message from Starfleet. It's classified, Code 2."

That meant it was for the Captain or, if he was not available, the First Officer. Kirk hesitated; he was not actually First Officer yet... He called sickbay.

"Dr. Syvik, how is the Captain?"

"As well as can be expected, Mr. Kirk, and under sedation."

"A message arrived from Starfleet, Code 2. Can he deal with it?"

"Definitely not at this moment. I'd suggest that you deal with it yourself, Mr. Kirk."

"Thank you, Doctor."

As he had no choice, Kirk took the message and quickly deciphered it, then looked up, seeing the eyes on him with embarrassment. "It confirms... my promotion to First Officer," he announced as firmly as he could, wishing someone else could have made the announcement! He had never felt so embarrassed...

"It was expected, but congratulations are in order just the same, Commander," said Mr. Salyk.

Kirk could not help enjoying the new title, he was only Human! The other officers added their congratulations, which Kirk knew now were genuine, not merely polite, then he thanked them briefly and added, "There is more. We are to go to Starbase 1 for an inspection by Admiral Sarek. Change course immediately, Mr. Sirak, maximum speed -- we have to be there in five days."

"We'll make it, Mr. Kirk," assured Sirak.

Just as well, thought Kirk, sure that such a high-ranking officer would not expect to have to wait. He had a sneaking suspicion Sarek wanted to look the Human First Officer over. I'll give him his money's worth, the ship will be in top condition. "Does Admiral Sarek expect high standards?" he asked.

"No, Mr. Kirk," replied Mr. Salyk. "He expects perfection."

"Oh! He does, does he? We'll have to see that he gets it, then, and as the Captain can't do the pushing, I'll do it for him. His ship will be perfect."

He gave a tight and long programme of instructions to be carried out to all sections, with dire threats if it was not accomplished in time, and went around each department himself to check he had forgotten nothing. Satisfied at last that the Enterprise could only be 'perfect' by the time they reached Starbase 1, Kirk went to sickbay to see his Captain, hoping he would be fit to meet his father.

He found Spock asleep and he informed Dr. Syvik who assured him that the Captain should be able to walk by then, if not for too long at a time. Then they saw that Spock had awakened, so Kirk was allowed to see him. He gave the news, and added, "My first thought was that your father wants to look me over. Am I right?"

"Possibly, but he made the appointment first, to signify that he trusted my choice."

"Yes, that was considerate of him. I wonder if his HQ accepted my promotion easily? And is he worried about your having a Human First Officer?"

"Why should he? He has a Human wife! Which of course means that the ship has a half-Human Captain."

Kirk smiled, and yet he had the impression that Spock was hiding something. "Jim," said the Captain, without his usual assurance, "there are things ... I cannot tell you yet - not without my father's permission, but I am sure he will give it."

"You guessed what I was thinking."

"As you guessed that I was hiding something."

"Yes, and neither of us needed telepathy... I don't mind not knowing, Captain, I'm only the First Officer - but I'm in charge at the moment, so my order is for you to get better!"

On his way back to his quarters, Kirk did wonder about the secret, but without worrying about it. If the Captain was involved, it was nothing shady or unlawful, of that he was sure.

He was not overjoyed to find Sulu waiting and he had to ask him in, trying to hide his reluctance. His visitor looked angry.

"Mr. Kirk, I have to tell you that your conduct will be reported. You had a unique opportunity to achieve the Plan and you ignored it."

"How can I possibly achieve success for the Plan when no-one will tell me what it is?" snapped Kirk, suddenly impatient with all this secrecy.

"Furthermore," continued Sulu, ignoring the outburst, "you betrayed a care for a Vulcan you should reserve for Humans like ourselves, and..." He was interrupted by McCoy bursting in.

"Mr. Sulu, I thought you'd be here! Look, I've thought and thought, and I can't believe Jim would betray us for a Vulcan. Don't you see how he'll be trusted so completely now that the Plan should present no problem and arouse no suspicion?"

"Is that what your game is?" asked Mr. Sulu.

I must go along until I know that wretched Plan, thought Kirk, although I'm starting to have a good idea... Aloud, he stated, "I acted as I thought I should, and my conscience is clear." - Which was the truth.

"I see. Sorry, Mr. Kirk, I thought it was rather exaggerated, the show of concern, etc... but your judgement has been sound up to now."

"Anyway," added McCoy, pushing the matter aside, "Chekov has arranged for a small show to take place immediately, while His Lordship is out of the way. Everything's ready and all we have to do is give the signal. The red alert will sound soon and Klingons will attack. Put up an impressive show, Jim."

"Good man, Chekov," approved Sulu. "Best of luck, Mr. Kirk." They departed and Kirk searched his memory for instructions. Since beginning his friendship with the Captain, he had tried to clear his mind of anything to do with plots and counterplots, but now he had to remember... Yes. He had been told that if he was warned by members of a Klingon attack, he had to let the crew of it escape while he captured the ship as trophy, but he was free to use his own discretion should circumstances alter the situation.

Could some Earth people have made an alliance with the Klingons? The very thought made him sick after the way his Captain was tortured. Maybe they would be Earthmen disguised as Klingons, but as far as he was concerned, they were enemies and he would treat them as such! As for explanations to the Humans - he was clever enough, he hoped, to find some way of averting suspicion.

He did have time for a short rest before the red alert sounded, and he ran to the bridge.

"One Klingon vessel sighted, Mr. Kirk," reported Mr. Salyk. "Unusual design, perhaps a new model. The markings are definitely Klingon."

"It is rather small," remarked Kirk.

"Yes, sir, therefore it may not attack and just go when it sees us."

The intercom buzzed from sickbay and he heard Spock's voice. "Mr. Kirk, no unnecessary violence. The Federation is trying to avoid war with the Klingons, so if they don't attack, ignore them. This is free space."

"Acknowledged, Captain."

Kirk asked for a magnification of the ship on the screen and studied it intently; he had to know if they were Humans or Klingons, because if they were Humans, he could expect treachery for sure!

The Klingon emblem was visible enough on the hull, and yet there was something vaguely familiar about that ship... His intense scrutiny paid off, he recognised an early Earth vessel type he had seen in a museum when a child, with odd parts stuck on to make it look alien and different. So they were Humans!

"Captain," said Uhura at the communications post, "I'm getting a distress signal."

Is she telling the truth? wondered Kirk. And yet Uhura of all the Humans was a possible non-member of the Party - he had noticed the way she looked at Spock at times.

The lift doors opened and Spock emerged, supported by Dr. Syvik on his right and a stick on his left. Kirk hurriedly saluted and went to his aid, reporting the situation.

"We'll investigate," said the Vulcan. "We cannot ignore a distress call from anyone."

"I would recommend care, sir," said Kirk, trying to communicate a warning with his eyes. "It could be a trap to get us near so that they can attack."

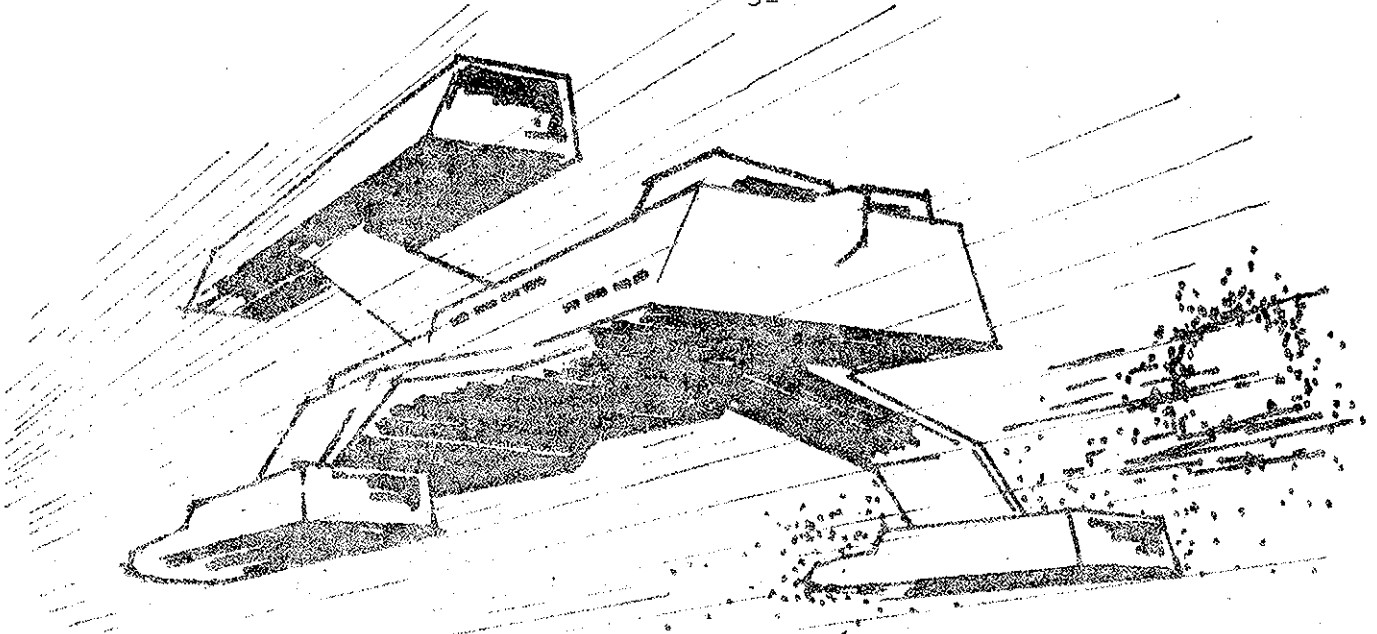
"True, Mr. Kirk, we'll apply caution. Approach the vessel, but remain outside the probable range of its weapons. Lt. Uhura, ask the nature of..."

Kirk looked up, startled by the sudden stop, and saw the hands gripping the chair and noticed the uneven breath.

"Captain!... Doctor, do something, he's in pain!"

"I don't understand," stated Dr. Syvik, running his scanner. "A pain killer was administered... Captain..."

Both he and Kirk caught Spock as he fell and the Vulcan murmured through



clenched teeth, "I can't... Take over, Ji... Mr. Kirk."

Dr. Syvik administered an injection and Spock lost consciousness. "Sick-bay, emergency, have all apparatus ready for the Captain," said the doctor through the intercom, words which did not reassure Kirk!

McCoy arrived with nurses to take the Captain away and the Human doctor murmured to Kirk, "Don't worry, I kept him out of your hair, didn't I? He won't be back for a while!"

Kirk watched them go, hiding his anger as best he could. The Captain was in great pain, how had McCoy managed to... He ran to Dr. Syvik as he entered the lift and pulled him out of earshot. "Doctor, please keep a close watch on the Captain!"

"Yes, Mr. Kirk, I certainly will," assured the doctor, leaving Kirk a little happier, although he wished he could go and keep watch himself!

They had reached the position ordered by Spock and Kirk told Uhura to send a message asking what help was needed. The 'Klingon' ship ignored the message.

"Mr. Kirk," said Salyk, "the vessel is not damaged in any way. Nothing indicates any emergency to cause a distress signal to be sent."

"I believe it is a trap, Mr. Salyk, but we'll make sure. Shields up; get nearer, Mr. Sirak, and have phasers standing by."

As Kirk expected, the ship fired at them, but a very much off the mark shot. "Right, that's all I needed to be sure!" he exclaimed. "Mr. Sulu, get up, I'll take your place. Mr. Sirak, let us see what good marksmen we are. We'll aim at their starboard, a phaser beam to miss the ship by inches, but throw it off balance."

"It will make it spin, Mr. Kirk."

"That's the idea! We'll leave them spinning, might clear their heads!"

"Of what, Mr. Kirk?" asked a bewildered Vulcan.

"Mr. Kirk," called Salyk before Kirk could think of a reply, "I am getting confused readings about the aliens on board that vessel. They must be Klingons, and yet..."

"I can guess the rest, Mr. Salyk. We are in position - fire!"

Both Kirk and the Vulcan navigator pressed the button and their marksmanship proved accurate; the small ship started spinning wildly.

"Good. Now we'll leave them to sort it out. Back to our schedule, Mr. Sirak. Mr. Salyk, take the con. I'll be in sickbay."

He found the Captain looking ghastly, but Dr. Syvik reassured him. "He is in no danger, Mr. Kirk. He was given the wrong injection. My orderly is naturally on a charge."

"Don't be too hard on him, Doctor. I'm sure it was a genuine mistake on his part."

"I don't doubt it, but mistakes in medicine can be costly."

Kirk nodded and gently wiped the perspiration from the Vulcan Captain's sleeping face, then went to the intercom and ordered a security guard to be in sickbay at all times as long as the Captain was there.

"Mr. Kirk," protested Dr. Syvik, "don't you trust my care for... "

"Please, Doctor, I assure you I never doubted your integrity for one single second. I am not at all happy about that wrong injection and would not like a repetition of the accident."

"You mean you suspect... You have no proof, have you?"

"No, Doctor - that is why I take precautions."

"Logical," agreed the doctor, "but my orderly never... "

"I am sure he is blameless, Doctor, but we can't take the matter further." The Vulcan nodded understandingly and Kirk left in search of McCoy, who welcomed him in high spirits.

"Well, did you put up a good show, Jim? That stubborn Vulcan would insist on going to the bridge, so I switched the painkiller and he got something which played havoc with his insides, I can tell you! Never saw him looking so green! It's difficult to remain dignified when you're sick as hell, although His Lordship, curse him, practically managed it!"

Kirk felt thoroughly nauseated but tried to hide it as best as he could - to remember that this man was his friend was becoming difficult. He was spared having to reply by the arrival of Scotty, Sulu and Chekov, and their sombre expressions promised trouble.

"Mr. Kirk, we have to talk," said Scotty. "My quarters; please follow me."

Kirk agreed with good enough grace; perhaps he would finally be told the famous Plan!

"Why didn't you follow our plan?" asked Sulu ferociously as soon as they had sat down. "We are fed up with your improvisations!"

"Just a minute, lad," interrupted Scotty, "let the Commander speak. Don't forget our leaders put all their faith in him. Now, Mr. Kirk, why didn't you let the 'Klingon' crew escape and capture the ship as a trophy? The capture of a new enemy ship would have been a real feather in your cap!"

Kirk was ready for this one. "I don't know who concocted that so-called alien ship," he replied scornfully, "but it wouldn't have fooled a close inspection and it would have finished by creating trouble and suspicion, not rewards! One look at ancient records would have shown it up as an Earth vessel!"

"Are you sure? I thought it was well done!" protested Chekov.

"The Vulcans aren't morons, you know! In fact, they're highly intelligent! You'd better think again if you want to fool them. If I could recognise it, they certainly would have! And Mr. Salyk knew the life readings on board weren't right for Klingons..."

"In that case, you acted rightly," conceded Sulu with reluctance. "We did not have enough time to do better..."

"I told you Jim was O.K.," beamed McCoy. "We'll have better luck next time. The Plan can't fail with him as the key!"

"Are you sure?" asked Kirk tentatively.

"Of course!" replied McCoy after Sulu had given a nod of assent. "What better plan than to eliminate His Lordship by 'accident' and have you in charge for a long period? You'll prove you can be Captain and we'll get recognition that we are as good or better than Vulcans."

So that's it! thought Kirk, murder is what they have in mind... "It's a big risk to kill a Starship Captain," he remarked.

"We won't be that daft, Jim! We'll let someone or something do it for us! After Starbase 1, we'll be on an uncharted space mission, so we'll just watch our chance. We're bound to come across a planet with bugs or nasty natives, and we'll simply leave His Lordship behind! It's bound to succeed!"

Not if I have anything to do with it! thought Kirk, revolted, but hiding it carefully; also aware that even if he and the Captain hadn't become friends, he would still have been unwilling to participate in such a scheme. He was relieved however as he walked back to his quarters that the famous Plan did not involve a direct murder of his Commanding Officer, and he wondered how long he could fool the Humans that he was working with them.

The next day, he found the Captain recovered from McCoy's drug if still hobbling about and he told him the famous Plan. "All this intrigue and plotting is sickening me," he added. "I have an urge to tell them a few home truths!"

"Jim, you must not betray yourself, or you could be under sentence of death too."

"I hadn't thought of that. I'm not sure that they don't doubt me a little, but so far I've been able to prove to them that their schemes haven't been reasonable. But we have a more immediate problem, Captain. Tomorrow we'll be at Starbase 1. Will you be well enough?"

"I'll manage."

The next day, the Captain was still unable to walk normally, but with typical Vulcan stoicism managed to hide all sign of stress. Kirk, who had called at his quarters to accompany him to the hangar deck, proud of wearing Commander's dress uniform, saw how he had difficulty disguising a limp, and had protested.

"Captain, you shouldn't... "

"I must, Jim; a question of honour and endurance my people, and above all my father, would expect of me."

"Yes, I was told your father expected perfection! It made me feel nervous while I dressed, so it might be an idea to check if my uniform has anything amiss."

"No, there is nothing wrong, it will satisfy even my father," assured Spock.

"Good. There is one thing I'd like to mention, Captain... "

"Yes, what is it?"

"I appreciate very much the times you call me 'Jim', and I am aware you do it because you know it pleases me that you should indicate your friendship... "

"You think I only do it to humour your humanity? It is partly true, Jim, but even Vulcans recognise friendship! Why did you mention the subject?"

"I wanted to tell you that I'll understand if you have to be formal at all times in front of your father."

"It certainly will be necessary with anyone else present, but my father does have a few Human friends and I hope you'll stop thinking of him as what I believe you called a 'bogey man'."

Kirk laughed at the incongruous expression probably no Vulcan had ever used before and followed his Captain to the hangar deck, thinking that as time went by, his Commanding Officer might pick up more odd expression from him.

The shuttlecraft was announced and after a last inspection of the guard of honour, the Captain and his First Officer took up their post at the door. The golden dress uniform was very elegant and Kirk hoped his own blue one looked well by its side as he felt the familiar butterflies in his stomach. He had never met an Admiral yet, and this was a Vulcan one...

The hangar door opened and the guard of honour trooped in and presented honours as the shuttlecraft door opened and Admiral Sarek stepped out, followed by two Starfleet officers.

Kirk was glad to have time to observe him as he walked down the guard of honour, and he immediately recognised the same innate elegance he had seen in his Captain. The Admiral's uniform, white with silver trimmings, was striking and made a sharp contrast with the dark hair not yet streaked with grey. It made the tall and very distinguished Vulcan even more awe-inspiring, and Kirk was glad he had taken so many precautions to make the ship perfect, sure that not a single thing would escape those dark eyes, very similar to his Captain's and even more penetrating, in spite of their lack of expression.

Admiral Sarek stopped in front of the Captain who stood at attention and saluted, pronouncing the usual words of welcome. The Admiral responded very briefly, also giving the Vulcan salute and touching hands for a second. Kirk remembered from the tapes he had seen that it indicated a close relationship between the two Vulcans, and doubted that the word 'close' would apply in Human terms to such a cold display!

"My newly-promoted First Officer, Commander Kirk," the Captain was now introducing him.

Kirk made the Vulcan salute, standing at attention, and felt the dark and penetrating eyes on him.

"Congratulations, Commander, you are the first Earthman to reach that rank. To prove that you are worthy of it is now your task."

"Loyalty is a virtue among Vulcans, sir. May I be worthy of my Captain's confidence at all times and prove my own loyalty." Kirk had managed to utter the words in a firm voice, and was pleased when the Admiral nodded as though to approve them. But he made no comment and started the ship's inspection under the Captain's guidance.

The Vulcan officers in each section gave impeccable honours to their superior and Kirk found himself standing next to McCoy in the medical department at one time and heard him whisper, "Look at those two! Typical Vulcan aristocrats! So elegant and courteous, turning women's heads... I can't stand those dress uniforms!"

"Why do you dislike the Captain, Doctor?" asked Kirk, suddenly curious.

"He's not Human and you know Vulcans have those peculiar mind powers. It's enough to give you nightmares the way they could take your mind over! The Captain should have horns and a tail and look like the monster he is, ugly and repulsive! Instead of which he's the epitome of handsomeness and elegance and he knows it, looking down on us with that icy and arrogant look of his! His father is even worse and stares at you from a great height because he feels so superior to us Humans!"

He is superior to you! Kirk nearly shouted, his control taxed to the limit and wanting to put his hands over his ears.

"Think what tricks he must have used to ensnare a poor woman from Earth!" continued McCoy. "Probably dominated her completely, took her mind over as we'll all finish if we're not careful, toys for them!"

Kirk was struck dumb by such appalling beliefs, and yet he had heard it all on Earth before, and worse! And he had believed it - at least, until he actually met Vulcans. It made him realise McCoy was not completely at fault, he did not know better, and if he could show him... But how? All it boiled down to here was that the doctor felt that the Captain was his superior and resented it bitterly. Uhura's worshipping gaze as she watched the Vulcan did not help either. But was she sincere, or meant as bait for the Captain? Trying to trap him? Could he trust any Human on board?

The inspection finished, Admiral Sarek congratulated the officers and crew very formally and added afterwards, "Captain, I wish to see you in private. Your First Officer too."

"My quarters are at your disposal, sir."

The Captain led the way to his cabin and Kirk was glad it was over; his Commanding Officer had never once shown any sign of a limp or pain, but his endurance was bound to have limits.

He was right, the Captain collapsed once inside his quarters, but alert as he had been, Kirk was forestalled by Admiral Sarek who led his son to a chair. "You are in pain, Spock, let me help you!"

"Shall I call the Doctor?" asked Kirk, worried.

"Unnecessary, Mr. Kirk," replied the Admiral as he put his hands on the Captain's face and the younger Vulcan visibly relaxed.

"Thank you, father."

Kirk wondered if he should withdraw and leave father and son... but he had been ordered to come... The Captain guessed his thought, as he often did, and said, "Stay, Mr. Kirk. Father, the Commander guessed that you might want to meet him, hence the inspection."

"Not quite accurate, the Enterprise was due for an inspection in the near future. I must admit I was curious to meet the Earthman my son thought so highly of, Mr. Kirk, and I had to before I could give permission, Spock."

"Yes, father, I understand."

Kirk was bewildered. "Permission?... But I've already been promoted!"

"What my father was referring to was permission to reveal to you the true nature of the experiment the Enterprise is the scene of."

"Experiment? She is an experimental vessel, I know..."

"Yes, Mr. Kirk," said Admiral Sarek, "and the most able ship Starfleet possesses. But haven't you wondered why the crew is a strictly Vulcan/Human combination?"

"I can't say I have, sir, although it is true that the other vessels I've served on have all been multi-racially crewed. Is it because your son is half-Human?"

"No, although he was the logical choice to command such a ship. It may surprise you to know that the alien races in general, and Vulcans in particular, are not anxious to see Earth remain a lesser member of the Federation."

Kirk was startled by the words and listened with great attention as Sarek went on to explain how the Enterprise was a unique experimental vessel. Starfleet had put some of the most able Humans from its ranks aboard, with Vulcans in charge to observe them without being swayed by emotions, and also because the plan had been put forward by Vulcan. Some alien races had not been in favour of it, saying it was too early; Earth was not civilised enough. But the Vulcans had persisted with their idea that, after so many years, it might be possible to show that Humans could be trustworthy, and Earth an equal member, a point some members of the Federation were reluctant to agree to.

"That is what we are trying to make Earth achieve, Commander," continued Sarek, "for we believe that Earth people are not inferior. To prove it to the Federation we have organised many experiments and trials, this ship being one of them. You were promoted on merit, and we were pleased, for you are the first proof that we are right. If the other Humans prove loyal to their Vulcan officers, then the reverse is true and Humans are worthy of loyalty, therefore should be allowed high rank. It is unfair to stop them with a law they can only resent."

And those idiots intend to ruin everything! thought Kirk with hidden anger. "Sir," he asked aloud, "shouldn't they be told of the experiment? That there is at least a possibility that in future their merit will be recognised?"

"No, Mr. Kirk, and I trust you will not tell them; they must remain in ignorance and obey from loyalty only, or the experiment would have no value."

"Yes. I do see that, sir."

"Do not think it makes the Vulcans all good and the Humans all bad, Mr. Kirk," added the Captain. "Many Vulcans do not trust your people and don't appreciate the show they make of their emotions - they don't understand the need. My father spent nearly a whole year getting this experiment approved in Starfleet alone. The Humans are not all bad - many of them just don't know, as you did not until you met us."

"And if you were able to revise your way of thinking, Mr. Kirk," added Sarek, "there is no reason to suppose that others can't do the same. I'm indeed gratified that one Earthman at least is proving trustworthy, and so soon."

"He may be the only one," sighed Kirk, explaining the Plan he was supposed to participate in and was also determined to see fail, pointing out that simple frustration at being unable to use their ability to the full was what had driven some at least of the Humans to join the Party.

Sarek understood. "It makes the situation dangerous for you, Mr. Kirk," he remarked thoughtfully, "and should you prefer to transfer to another vessel..."

"No, sir," protested Kirk. "I love the Enterprise, and Captain Spock is the best Captain I've served under."

Sarek's eyes shone slightly in a hidden smile. "A very complimentary answer for my son, Mr. Kirk, I thank you. And now that official matters are terminated, I'll ask my wife to come aboard. She wants to see you, Spock."

Kirk made to leave as the Admiral contacted Starbase 1, but Spock detained him. "I would like you to meet my mother, Jim, and I am sure she will like meeting you."

"I'll be pleased to, Captain," assured Kirk truthfully, curious to meet the Earthwoman who had chosen exile to marry a Vulcan.

Sarek had finished his talk with Starbase and Kirk asked him with typical Human curiosity, "Your marriage to an Earthwoman was an unexpected event, sir. Have there been many mixed marriages?"

"Very few, Mr. Kirk. Mine is well-known because of my rank, and my wife's father was a member of your Government. It made me one Vulcan able to vouch that some Earth people are trustworthy."

"Yes," smiled Kirk, "I can see why. Are you aware that Earth people fear your mental powers?"

"Indeed we are. We have tried to convince them that we have rigorous ethics for their use, but with little success so far. We are not the only aliens Humans don't get on with by any means, as you probably know. Only recently, the Federation had great difficulty stopping a war between Humans and Tellarites after insults were exchanged between the two Ambassadors."

"I expect the Tellarite was called 'pig-faced'!" sighed Kirk.

"Among other things. The Tellarites are not perfect, impatience being one of their failings, but their physical appearance is hardly their fault."

Kirk nodded, feeling depressed. To accuse aliens of being ugly was unfair and he had always thought so, his people should stop that at least!

"Do not judge your people too harshly, Mr. Kirk," said Sarek's even voice, "they will learn, as we all did in the past; our aim is to avoid major tragedies in the process and hasten it as much as possible."

"Yes, sir, I understand, and will do my best for you."

"I'm sure you will," nodded Sarek. "My wife's craft will have arrived by now; I will go and meet her. She finds the presence of Earth people often upsetting without a Vulcan escort."

And I can guess why! thought Kirk furiously as he watched the Admiral go out.

"Do not distress yourself, Jim," said the Captain soothingly, "my mother is used to it by now, and must have heard all the insults the Terran language contains. My father's presence at her side usually restrains any such occurrence."

"I bet it does!" smiled Kirk.

"Would you get a meal sent here? Mixed food of course, and I'll be pleased if you stay and share it with my parents and myself."

"But... they haven't seen you lately and you should..."

"My mother will enjoy talking to an Earthman who does not despise her, Jim, and she is naturally curious about you."

Kirk nodded, moved, and gave the order, which arrived just before Sarek and his wife Amanda. The First Officer took to his Captain's mother straight away, and any embarrassment at being a possible intruder into the family circle vanished when he felt how genuinely he was welcome.

After the meal, Sarek drew Spock aside to hand over the new orders for the Enterprise and Amanda took the opportunity of saying to Kirk, "I'm pleased Spock has found such a friend as you, Mr. Kirk, and a relief from the terrible loneliness he has known. I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

Kirk bowed slightly, too moved to speak, and accompanied the visitors to the hangar deck with his Captain. At the door, Sarek made the Vulcan salute and said simply, "Live long and prosper, Commander."

Kirk saluted back formally, bowed in front of Amanda and stayed by the door as the Captain alone accompanied his parents to the shuttlecraft.

As he waited, the First Officer saw Sulu approach him surreptitiously, with surprise. "You do inspire confidence in Vulcans, Mr. Kirk, congratulations! Even the Admiral was taken in! The Plan will succeed, and you'll soon be Captain."

"Hasn't it occurred to you that there is another way?" asked Kirk with some hesitation.

"Which is?"

"Through loyalty to superior officers."

Sulu stared, clearly taken aback. "Are you mad? The law forbids us any high rank. We have to prove ourselves, despite it! And by hook or by crook we'll get there! Then we'll order Vulcans about for a change! Shame His Lordship won't see that - I'd love to order him about and put him in his place, wipe away that superior expression of his! Looking down on us as though we were dirt under his feet!"

Hopeless! thought Kirk, they won't see the Vulcans as they are, but as they want them to be.

He reported the conversation to Spock, who said thoughtfully, "Vulcans show no emotion, Jim, so it is perhaps understandable that Humans assume the worst; they have no sign to the contrary."

"Don't give me that! You and all the officers aboard treat them fairly, without any discrimination. Besides, you are half-Human..."

"The discipline is strict and there is all that saluting, although I do intend to have it cut down on as Humans gain equality. And I am a half-Human who has never been to Earth."

"The Vulcans salute just the same, and..." He was interrupted by a call from the bridge to tell the Captain that the Enterprise was now on course for the uncharted region she was to explore.

"Will you go, Jim? The Doctor assured me that my foot would be completely healed by tomorrow if I rest it now."

"I'll go, Captain." Kirk smiled as he left.

On his way to the bridge, he was waylaid by McCoy. "Jim, have I done anything to offend you?"

"No, Doctor, why?" asked Kirk uneasily, aware that the friendship between them was threatened, but he could not bring himself to continue with it when the doctor disliked Spock.

"You never call at my cabin any more."

Kirk hesitated; he did not like to lie. "That's true, Bones, and the reason should be obvious. I have been under suspicion lately..."

"I know, Jim, but I never believed you would betray us!"

"Nevertheless, Doctor, until we have proved ourselves, I prefer to remain on formal terms."

"You may be right. You shouldn't appear too friendly with Humans. I'm glad you take your mission seriously, Jim."

"I take it very seriously indeed, Doctor," assured Kirk, his tone unintentionally so intense that McCoy stared.

"You're worried, aren't you? Don't, Jim, it will go smoothly. Soon we'll be saluting you, Captain!"

That's what you think! murmured Kirk to himself, entering the lift, glad the conversation was over and McCoy fortunately suspected nothing.

Their exploration of uncharted space proved dull at first, with barren planets devoid of life, so it was a change to establish orbit around an Earth-type world inhabited by primitive humanoids. A party from the Enterprise had to beam down to do a survey in order to classify the planet accurately, without interfering with the natives if possible, although they would be unlikely to think that the strangers came from the stars!

Kirk did not like it when he heard the Captain announce the landing party, to consist of, apart from himself and the First Officer, McCoy, Scotty, Sulu and Chekov. "Why, Captain?" he asked in an aside.

"It is in accordance with instructions from Starfleet, Mr. Kirk. Humans have to be given every opportunity of proving themselves."

"Take the chief of security, then."

"No, there is no justification on such a mission. Besides, if they want to put their plan into operation, the first thing they would do is kill him."

"You're right. We'll have to keep our eyes open."

One thing reassured Kirk a little; only the Captain had a phaser. No Human was allowed one, and with reason! Also, the landing party would have half-hourly checks with the ship unless contact with the natives prevented it, and the science officer would keep track of their progress through his sensors.

The planet was pleasant and preliminary readings showed it was rich in ore and a wide variety of deposits. Many areas were deserted, so it might be possible to do some mining without disturbing the natives, too primitive to have any interest in such things.

As some of the natives were nomadic tribes, the Captain decided on a contact; they would present themselves as strangers from far-away lands. After informing the ship, they arrived at a village where they were watched curiously and a little fearfully until a large humanoid barred Spock's way and threw a large spear at his feet.

"I challenge you!"

"Why?" asked Spock. "What have I done?"

"You haven't done anything," replied the native. "I'm Chief of this village, you are Chief of your group, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am."

"Two Chiefs is one too many, so one of us will die."

"Is that necessary?"

"Of course, or your followers will be put to death."

"I come from a far distant land where we don't have such customs. We are peaceful people and I do not want your place here, we are visitors only."

"Visitors only come to take! You will follow our custom or be put to death."

"What happens to my people if I die?"

"Nothing. I remain Chief and they can stay or go as they please."

"Then I accept."

"Captain," said Kirk with a frown, "may I suggest that I take your place... "

"No, Mr. Kirk, you will stand aside."

"We could easily master these natives, sir," whispered Kirk.

"We could, but we won't. We follow the custom."

Kirk nodded; it was in accordance with Starfleet's instructions. Besides they were badly outnumbered, and some of their group would have been wounded, if not killed, had they attacked.

The fight was with a spear only and the huge native was much heavier than Spock, but not taller.

"Lovely, Jim," murmured McCoy, "that native will do the job for us."

"Do you think so?" asked Kirk.

"Of course! I know Vulcans have strange powers, but this is too unequal."

Kirk said nothing, he was concentrating on watching that no-one helped the native Chief.

As the fight started, the natives cheered and the Humans did the same, shouting "Kill him!" without specifying who they meant. But to their disappointment, the battle did not last long, with Spock suffering only a very minor scratch from the spear, before the Chief lay disarmed and asleep at his feet, knocked out by the neck pinch.

"Devils, that's what they are!" swore Scotty.

"Dr. McCoy," called Spock, "the Chief is wounded, his arm is bleeding. Please attend to him."

"Me? Attend a native?"

"Yes, Doctor. That is an order."

"Yes, sir."

McCoy complied, clearly afraid of protesting any more, and bandaged the wound as the Chief came to and looked around, then smiled at Spock, got up and lifted his arm in salute. "Welcome. You are, as you said, peaceful, and we both shed blood, which makes us blood brothers."

"His blood is green," said McCoy with irony.

"Why not? He is a stranger," said the Chief.

"So the fight was really to see if he would try to kill you!" exclaimed Kirk with fascinated curiosity.

"Yes, of course. We are peaceful and do not like aggressive strangers. It is my job to protect my people."

"You ran a great risk in the fight."

"Not really," smiled the Chief, "should my opponent seriously try to kill me, one of my people would wound him to stop the fight, and we would throw the stranger out of the village!"

"A simple method," agreed Kirk.

They were offered a meal, but the Chief and Spock ate a little apart from the others, the native answering Spock's questions readily.

"Listen to His Lordship," sneered Sulu, "treating that barbarian as his equal and being so polite to him!"

"He is always polite," agreed Scotty, "to show us up no doubt, the snooty alien!"

"That's why he is always so immaculately dressed," added McCoy, "to show us up! Would you believe that even sick as hell he managed to remain dignified? Always has to flaunt his superiority, just because he is an aristocrat and we are not!"

Kirk choked on his drink and blessed his fit of coughing or he might have exploded. Didn't these Humans understand anything about Vulcans? And about Spock? And to think the Vulcans want to trust them! he thought.

After the meal, they left the village, followed by the good wishes of the natives, and Kirk kept a close watch on the Captain, ready to put a stop to any suspicious move from a Human. But he understood as he observed their behaviour that Spock intimidated and frightened them. They resented him, but were afraid of him, perhaps aware at the bottom of their hearts that he was their superior, in ethics at the very least.

The terrain was becoming rough and Sulu suddenly tripped and fell with a cry of pain. Spock, who was nearest, immediately took his arm to help him up.

"Can you stand, Mr. Sulu?"

"Don't touch me!" screamed Sulu with such fear that Spock let go and made way for McCoy who treated Sulu's nasty bruise quickly and pronounced him fit, no damage done.

"Mr. Kirk, why?" asked Spock as they watched the group of Humans helping Sulu up.

"My guess is fear of your telepathic powers; and if they are planning treachery..."

"They would be afraid I sensed it," finished Spock. "Logical from their point of view."

Kirk did not comment further as the group went on with their survey, and he tried to concentrate both on the work and on his Captain's safety.

"Contact the ship, Mr. Kirk," ordered Spock after a while, "and tell Mr. Sirak we'll beam up in fifteen minutes. Our preliminary survey should be complete by then."

As though on cue, Spock's communicator bleeped, and he answered.

"Captain," said Sirak, "a large group of Klingon vessels has been detected. They will pass not far from this planet, although their objective is clearly not the planet itself."

"Have you been detected?"

"Unlikely, sir, we hid behind the planet immediately, and our sensors do have a greater range."

"Good. Leave orbit and keep out of sight. Return only when it is safe."

"Sir, shall we beam you up?"

"Negative, leave now. We'll wait here, there is no danger."

"Yes, sir."

Kirk nodded approvingly. In spite of his fear for the Captain, the safety of the ship could not be endangered just to beam them up; the Klingons could have detected the Enterprise, and if so, she had no time to lose. He turned to order the Humans to proceed with the survey when he was thrown to the ground and heard a strange hissing noise, followed by a gasp.

He had been thrown so hard that his head had bumped a stone and he felt slightly stunned, so he was unable to get up immediately.

"You're all right, Jim," said McCoy, applying a dressing to his forehead. Kirk pushed him away and saw the Captain fighting a huge snake quite successfully as he threw its head against a tree and the beast fell dead.

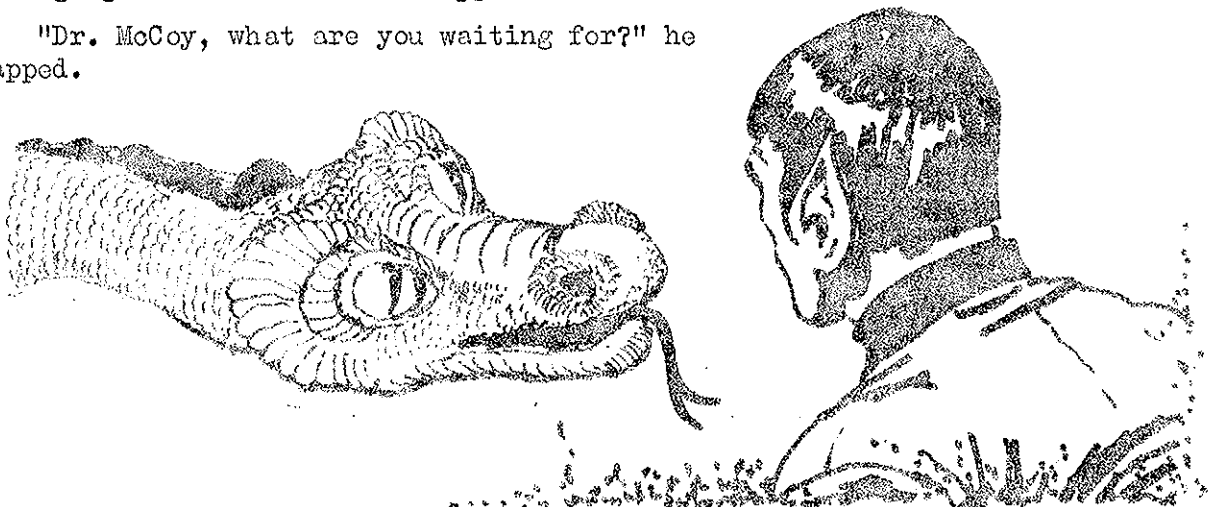
Thank God he is all right! he thought as he got up and went to the Vulcan who had thrown him aside when the snake attacked.

But something was wrong, Spock was leaning against a tree clutching his shoulder and swaying. Kirk managed not to cry out as he ran to him.

"Captain!"

"I was bitten..." murmured Spock, sliding to the ground, helplessly. Kirk helped him to sit leaning against the tree for support.

"Dr. McCoy, what are you waiting for?" he snapped.



The doctor winked at him and ran his scanner over the Captain, then examined the shoulder, swollen and a nasty colour. "Yes, a venomous bite, no doubt of it. I have no facility here to prepare an antidote for an unknown venom."

"Isn't there anything you can do?"

"No, Mr. Kirk. Anything I have on me would not work on a Vulcan in such a situation."

No, it wouldn't! Kirk swore under his breath. What could be done... oh, yes! "Right, I'll suck the venom out."

"Oh no you won't, Mr. Kirk," smiled Sulu, holding a phaser.

Kirk looked at Spock who nodded. "He took it... when I was bitten..."

"So the moment has come," stated Sulu with controlled excitement. "By the time the ship returns, the Captain will be dead from natural causes."

"You can't..." Kirk started to say, but Spock interrupted, making his voice as firm as he could.

"Mr. Kirk, I would not let you suck the venom in any case. It could kill you as well; a risk you have no right to take."

"How noble of you when you jolly well know we would stop him anyway!" sneered Sulu. "Superior to the last, damn you!" To Kirk's horror, Sulu struck Spock hard across the face. But he was keeping at a safe distance and pointing the phaser at him... "Be sensible, Mr. Kirk, the slightest wrong move and we stun you and carry you away. But why so reluctant to let him die? This is your chance now to prove how capable Humans are!"

Kirk forced himself to make his face a blank. He had to keep calm and seem to agree to the Plan or his Captain would die for sure. "I agree that the time has come for decisions, Mr. Sulu," he said, as calmly as he could.

"Good, you are the reasonable man I thought you were. But I'll keep the phaser just the same, in case your feet get cold again."

"He won't last long," declared McCoy. "That venom is slow-acting, obviously, but it will do the job just the same. We'll leave him here."

"Would you have hit a Human, Mr. Sulu?" asked Kirk suddenly.

"Of course not, Mr. Kirk! I'm not a barbarian!"

Kirk met Spock's eyes and read compassion and understanding with renewed despair. He could not show his hand while Sulu held that phaser...

"Take care... Jim..." murmured Spock in such a low voice that only Kirk heard.

"Must we leave him?" Kirk could not help asking, although he knew the answer.

The Vulcan's eyes opened and he murmured, "Water..."

"Only if you beg!" said Sulu viciously.

"Yes, beg for it!" taunted Chekov, following Sulu's lead.

Spock looked back at them calmly and remained silent.

"His Lordship won't beg!" sneered Sulu.

Unable to stand it any longer, Kirk was however forestalled by McCoy who handed him the small folding cup from his pouch. There was hope for him! The First Officer went to the nearby stream, filled it up and came back. If they stop me, he thought, they are beyond redemption!

"Mr. Kirk, you're spoiling our fun!" protested Chekov.

"Would you give water to a thirsty animal, Mr. Chekov?"

"Why, yes..." The ensign had the good grace to look down and did not interfere as Kirk supported Spock and gave him the drink. It was just as well they could not see Kirk's eyes then, or they would have noticed the care and anguish and love for a friend without any possible doubt.

"Thank you," murmured Spock weakly as he fell back against him. Kirk would have given anything to go on holding and comforting him, aware that he was perhaps the only one Spock did not mind such close physical contact with. But he had to let him go, Sulu was suspicious and would not hesitate to use the phaser.

"Come on, Jim, we must go," said McCoy, although he sounded slightly uncertain.

Settling the Vulcan down gently, Kirk forced himself to follow them away from his Captain. This can't be happening, he thought literally choked by anguish. But he took hold of himself and faced reality. Spock was not dead yet, so maybe that venom would not kill him, or at least be so slow-acting that it might still be possible to save him. He had to get that phaser! When would the ship get back? But his communicator remained silent.

They walked till it got dark. There was still silence from the ship, so they camped as best they could. Kirk watched for his chance; unfortunately, Sulu tied the weapon to his wrist, and Kirk's hope sank; Sulu was a very light sleeper. They made an unsuccessful attempt to call the ship, then settled for the night.

The others fell asleep and Kirk, seizing his chance, decided to go back to Spock, not that he could do anything. But he could not bear the idea of the Vulcan alone and dying.

With great care, he got up and walked away, very slowly at first. Sulu moved and checked the phaser. Just as well he hadn't tried to take it! As soon as he was out of hearing, he ran to the spot where he had left the Captain. He had memorised it well and was sure it was here, and yet... there was no-one! He could not have made a mistake, the moonlight gave good visibility and he saw the body of the snake, so it was the place. Where was Spock? He had been in no state to go anywhere!

Fighting the fear and grief threatening to overcome him, Kirk called the ship again, without success. So it was up to him to find Spock, to get help... but who from? ... The natives!

He ran to the village at such a speed that his lungs felt ready to burst, and he practically fell into the arms of the Chief. "Help me..." he panted. "My friend was... hurt... He has disappeared..."

"It's all right," soothed the Chief. "My hunters found my blood brother and brought him here only moments ago."

Kirk could have cried with relief and followed the Chief into the small dwelling where several natives were settling Spock on a low bed with a care and gentleness which contrasted vividly with Human care!

Kirk's relief was of short duration as he observed the Vulcan's critical condition. His breathing was very uneven and his eyes glazed and unseeing. "He was bitten by a snake..." Kirk started to explain.

"We know, my hunters saw the body of the beast," interrupted the Chief. "That snake bite is very dangerous for us too. We have herbs and special ointments and will try them on my brother."

Kirk was not too happy when the native doctor opened Spock's shoulder and made it bleed profusely, then applied flat brown leaves and a strange goo to it, but if it did no good, it would probably do no harm in the circumstances, and at least Spock was no longer alone and uncared for.

"He is very weak," said the native doctor. "A drink of blood would help him, it helps us considerably in similar situations."

"Blood? No, he would reject it," explained Kirk, "he does not eat meat..."

"I did not mean animal blood, I meant blood from people, but his blood is green, so our blood may not help..."

What they meant was a blood transfusion, perhaps? wondered Kirk, a drink of blood would hardly have any effect, surely? But native remedies were often sound, so he was willing to try. "Take some of my blood and give it to him. It is not green, but it may help."

"Are you also his blood brother?" asked the Chief with interest.

"You could say that," smiled Kirk.

The native doctor extracted a glassful of blood from his arm with remarkable skill and care and Kirk took the small container and made Spock sit up. The Vulcan's eyes focused as he surfaced from unconsciousness.

"Jim!"

"It's all right, Captain. You are safe here. Drink this."

"What is it?... No... no..."

"Please, Spock, it's not animal blood, it's mine. The natives say it might help you, so please drink it, please! I can spare it!"

The Vulcan resisted no longer and swallowed it all, then murmured "Thank you" before losing consciousness again.

"Should he have more blood?" asked Kirk.

"Not yet, maybe later."

"I'll give some next, it is my turn," stated the Chief with such emphasis that Kirk understood it would greatly upset the native if he objected. The blood might do little to help, but it was unlikely to do harm, so it did not matter a great deal.

There was nothing else he could do. Kirk wondered if the others were looking for him by now. Perhaps he should get back or they might come here and kill the Captain and many natives too. Reluctant though he was to leave Spock, the natives were able to do more for him than he could at the moment, and he would hate to see any of them killed trying to protect the Vulcan from Humans; Sulu would not hesitate to use the phaser, he was sure. So he had to go back. The natives did not detain him and promised to take good care of Spock.

"He is my blood brother, we'll do all we can," assured the Chief with obvious sincerity.

The First Officer, once outside the village, tried to contact the ship again, without success. So he ran back to the camp and found no-one. He went back to the place where they had left Spock to die, and sure enough they were there.

"And what are you doing here, Mr. Kirk?" asked Sulu, pointing the phaser at him, a distinct note of menace in his voice.

"I came back to see if he was dead," replied Kirk, "but could not find him, so I tried to return to the camp and got lost for a while. When I did find the camp, you were not there..."

"He was right to want to make sure," said McCoy. "I can assure you that the Captain must be dead by now. If he crawled away to hide like an animal, who cares?"

"Maybe some beastie ate him," said Scotty. "It does not matter."

Sulu's communicator bleeped, to Kirk's surprise. "I took the Captain's communicator too," smirked Sulu, opening it.

"Enterprise to Captain Spock, come in please."

"You answer, Mr. Kirk, and be careful what you say, we don't want to arouse suspicion."

"Kirk speaking. The Captain met with an accident, I'm afraid."

"Where is he, Mr. Kirk?"

"Unknown, Mr. Sirak."

"Please elaborate, Mr. Kirk."

McCoy grabbed the communicator. "He was bitten by a venomous snake. I had no antidote. He sent us away, wanting to die alone. Now his body has disappeared, possibly some wild animal..."

"I see, thank you Dr. McCoy. Do you confirm, Mr. Kirk?"

"Yes, Mr. Sirak," replied Kirk, pressing the red emergency button unobtrusively while the others' eyes were not on his hand to warn the Vulcans something was wrong.

"Thank you, Mr. Kirk. We'll beam you up now. Stand by."

Kirk hoped there was still time to save the Captain, and felt sure the Vulcans had understood his signal and were already taking steps to act quickly. As they stepped from the transporter pads, Kirk saw the unobtrusive presence of several security guards, but he made a negative sign to the science officer who had operated the transporter. Arrests could wait!

"Mr. Sulu," ordered Kirk, "you will hand over the Captain's phaser and communicator."

Sulu started, then heard the science officer say, "It was going to be my first request, Mr. Sulu. Please hand them to the security chief, or I will have to assume that you obtained them unlawfully."

"Yes, of course, sir," agreed Sulu, obeying promptly, and muttering to Kirk, "I should have expected this - just as well you thought of it."

"Before Commander Kirk assumes command," stated the science officer, "we naturally have to investigate the death of our Captain. Mr. Kirk, you'll come to the bridge with me and report there. The others will report to the security chief, as usual under such circumstances, and will consider themselves confined to quarters until the enquiry is over."

Kirk nodded to himself. Following normal procedure would not make them suspicious. Sure that the Vulcan security team would take good care of the four Humans, Kirk followed the science officer out of the transporter room and started to run. "Quickly, Mr. Salyk, the Captain needs help."

"Isn't he dead?"

"No, but he is very ill."

"We tried to locate him or his body as soon as we heard."

They arrived on the bridge and Kirk looked at the Vulcans uneasily. He could not blame them if they suspected him! Significantly, not a single Human other than himself was present.

"What happened, Mr. Kirk?" asked Mr. Sirak.

The First Officer noticed the couple of security guards at the lift doors; he was under suspicion, that was clear! If they did not believe him... But to locate the village was priority, so he gave the approximate location of it in relation to their beaming-up point, then faced the senior officers whose faces showed nothing of any suspicion they might have. All Kirk could do was tell the truth. "And now I'll understand if you wish to put me under arrest," he finished, "but we must get the Captain first, and fast."

"I have pin-pointed the Captain," announced the science officer from his station, "but we cannot beam him aboard from among the natives. The doctor and I can beam down with you near the village, take charge of the Captain, and beam up once out of sight."

"Yes, that is best," agreed Kirk. "But do you want me to come with you?"

"Of course, Commander Kirk - the natives know you. Besides, we know you told the truth; we have no reason to distrust you."

"Thank you. Is the Captain still alive?"

"Yes, so that venom may not be mortal - or the natives cured him."

"Or he may still be dying. We must hurry."

All went according to plan and the Vulcan doctor gave Spock a couple of injections before they carried him away, after thanking the natives. The Captain did look a little better as they settled him in sickbay; perhaps native remedies had merits.

"Please let me have news as soon as possible," Kirk begged the doctor before leaving sickbay, "and do not let a single Human near him."

"I won't, Mr. Kirk," promised the doctor. "In fact no-one except the senior officers will know he is here. Every precaution has been taken."

Reassured, Kirk went to the bridge, and announced resolutely, "Now we tackle the prisoners."

"If you mean Dr. McCoy, Mr. Scott, Mr. Sulu and Mr. Chekov, they are not held prisoners."

"But they should be in the brig for attempted murder!"

"We are in a difficult situation, Mr. Kirk," said Salyk. "First, it is not attempted murder, but assault. Second, if they are incarcerated now, they'll know you betrayed them and you would be in danger should they have associates or accomplices, which is likely."

"Yes, I am sure they have, but when the Captain recovers they'll know I betrayed them..."

"Not necessarily, Mr. Kirk. The natives rescued the Captain, and we could have detected him and beamed him up."

"Yes, that's true. But the vicious assault by Mr. Sulu?"

"That will be up to the Captain to deal with, Mr. Kirk, once he is fit. This way, you might avoid suspicion and danger."

"Once they know he is alive, they might try to kill him out of anger..."

"We'll make sure they don't, Security has been alerted and will keep watch. But I do not think they will act so rashly. The doctor may have news for us now."

Kirk called sickbay with a blend of fear and excitement. "How is the Captain, Doctor?"

"Out of danger, Mr. Kirk. He should however stay here for at least three days."

The release of tension was too much for Kirk after the painful hours he had spent in deep anguish; he could not help giving way as he shouted into the intercom, laughing and crying, "Spock, you are all right!"

"Please, Mr. Kirk, not so loud," protested the doctor. "And I am afraid the Captain can't hear you, he is asleep. I'd be grateful if you did not wake him."

Kirk took hold of himself and wiped his eyes hurriedly. "I apologise for

my emotional outburst," he told the Vulcans with great simplicity and without shame, "but I feared for my Captain."

"We understand, Mr. Kirk," said Sirak, his voice not quite as even as usual, "we also are... gratified at the news. You are Human, you need emotional release."

"Thank you. Did the Captain speak at all?" he asked the doctor through the intercom.

"Yes, mostly to inquire about your safety."

Relieved of his worry about Spock, Kirk resumed his duties and inquired about the Klingons. "You were away a long time; what happened?"

"We were detected leaving orbit and pursued, Mr. Kirk, which indicates an improvement in the Klingons' sensor range. We were able to outrun them without reaching maximum speed, though, which means we are still ahead in this field."

"For how long, I wonder? I want a message sent to Starfleet immediately reporting the increased sensor range."

Kirk dealt with other urgent matters and only when he knew the routine could run smoothly without him did he release command to Salyk and leave for sickbay. Once there, he was glad to see two security guards at the door and two more inside, to say nothing of two Vulcan physicians and two Vulcan orderlies attending the Captain - Spock was safe! But to feel completely free from worry, he renewed orders, clear and forceful, to stop any other Human from entering, no matter what reason or rank they had.

As Spock was still asleep, Kirk went back to the bridge and saw Sulu and McCoy arrive with hidden glee. They were in for a shock.

The two Humans eyed the occupant of the command chair with a large smile. "Are we to have a Human Captain for the rest of the journey?" beamed McCoy.

"What makes you say that, Dr. McCoy?" asked Sirak in the typical even voice of a Vulcan.

"Isn't it normal for the First Officer to take over if the Captain is dead?"

"But the Captain is not dead, Doctor - I'm sure you'll be gratified to know!"

Kirk nearly laughed aloud at the stupefaction of the Humans' features.

"Is it true, Jim?"

"Yes, Doctor, the Captain was rescued by the natives and is now recovering in sickbay. He'll be fit in about three days. I'm sure Mr. Scott and Mr. Chekov can't wait to hear the good news."

"You seem to be enjoying this, Mr. Kirk," said Sulu with a frown.

"Isn't that what we are all doing?" asked Kirk blandly.

"Yes, of course!" answered Sulu with understandable haste as he took his post by the Vulcan navigator. Uhura's arrival to relieve the communication officer did not help, she looked in seventh heaven after having heard that Spock was alive, and McCoy's exasperated look as he watched her seemed to indicate she was not one of the conspirators. It was in a very sombre mood that the doctor left the bridge. His Lordship had a charmed life!

Then, as the Humans remembered Kirk's long absence during the night, suspicion started.

When the Captain was allowed visitors, Kirk was naturally the first caller and sat by the bed silently, the two friends just looking at each other and understanding without words how they had feared for one another.

"Are you suspected of helping me, Jim?"

"Maybe, though I have had no reaction yet from anyone. But now you can have them court-martialled for assault on a superior officer..."

"Should I? I wonder."

"Captain?"

"What will happen if I prefer charges, Jim? I would either have to charge you as well, or you'll be known to have helped me. Besides, others would take their place."

"Yes, you're right, but I doubt that I can go on fooling them much longer."

"Once they know your true position, you would be in danger, and from an unknown source if they were in jail."

"Yes, but... you can't let them get away with it, Captain!"

"How will they react if I merely reprimand them severely?"

"The velvet glove?"

"Glove? What glove?"

Kirk smiled. "An Earth expression. I see what you mean, Captain, your leniency might make their brain cells start thinking along the correct lines at last. But I am not sure it would work, you know..."

"I will make a private record of events. We have nothing to lose, and will continue knowing who the active conspirators are."

"Yes, Captain, try it and see. About time they saw that Vulcans are not monsters!"

So once back on duty, the Captain asked Kirk to bring McCoy, Scotty, Sulu and Chekov to his quarters. "I will be hard on them Jim, they deserve it, but this will be less damaging to their careers. And I may frighten them enough to make them leave you alone."

"Be as hard as you like! I hope they realise how much harder you could have been."

Not a single Human looked happy as they stood at attention and saluted.

"At ease. Mr. Kirk, you may leave or stay, as you wish."

"I'll stay, sir."

"Isn't he on the carpet too?" asked Sulu.

"You are all standing on the carpet, Mr. Sulu," said Spock evenly as Kirk hid a smile, "so please abstain from meaningless remarks." He got up and faced them, taller and impeccably dressed as usual, and the icy coldness of his eyes and expression were not reassuring the Humans.

"I'm well aware by now, Gentlemen, that you consider me a miserable alien unworthy of tying your boot laces..."

"No, sir," Scotty tried to protest.

"Silence! I'm stating a fact, and it is a fact without importance; you are entitled to think what you wish." Kirk bit his lips to keep from laughing at the startled expressions of the Humans. "However," continued Spock, "while under my command, you will have to learn some things I thought any normal being knew, and it was a shock to me to discover that you four Humans could act in a manner which would debase an animal."

That's telling them! approved Kirk mentally.

"Sir..." protested Sulu.

"I said 'silence'," said Spock hardly raising his voice, and yet Sulu visibly shivered, while not one of them could look straight at the dark eyes. "Let me make one thing clear," continued Spock. "I am not interested in your emotions

- you may hate me as much as you like, it is of no consequence. But I will not have under my command men who strike and desert a defenceless being, be he friend or foe. There are such things as respect for the dignity of life, any life, and the duty to assist any being in need of help. Such a simple code of honour is inherent to any Vulcan. Am I to believe that Humans are devoid of honour and are the constant prisoners of their baser instincts? Your conduct was disloyal and cowardly, and I expected the Human level of civilisation to be above the barbaric stage. I am aware, Doctor, that you showed a glimmering of awareness of medical ethics, but not sufficient to redeem yourself."

The four Humans were by now looking at their feet and completely crushed, ready to crawl into a hole in the floor. They had to make an effort to hide their fear. The Captain sat down and said shortly, "Dismissed."

Startled, they looked up and hesitated, then McCoy managed to stammer, "The court-martial...?"

"There will be no court-martial; I have too much respect for my fellow officers to inflict upon them such contemptible specimens as yourselves. Dismissed."

They left silently, and Kirk saw for a fleeting instant sheer misery in those dark eyes he was now able to read at times.

"Did I go too far, Jim?"

"No, Captain, I would have said the same, and worse! But not with such impact, I think."

"Why not?"

"Because you are the alien aristocrat they know is their superior, only they won't admit it; so they resent the fact."

"Superior?"

"Their instinct is to obey you. But Humans don't like being ordered by other Humans, let alone Vulcans."

"I never thought I would see such behaviour."

"I know, it hurts," said Kirk softly. "I wish I saw a way... if I could show them..."

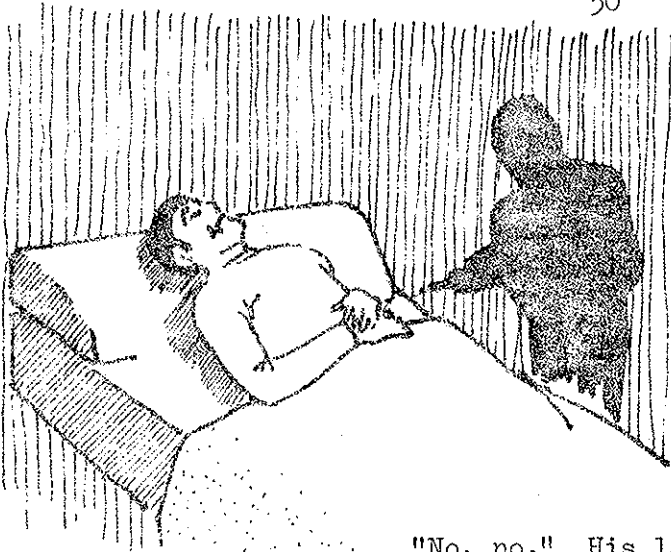
"Take care, Jim, they must suspect you now."

Kirk wondered what effect the Captain's well-deserved words had had, and was very disappointed by the result. The truth is always unpleasant to hear! The Humans had heard it and it had made them cringe in front of that Vulcan who had not even, supreme insult, bothered to have them court-martialled! Dark thoughts of killing the Captain filled their minds but Kirk read them and kept a close watch on Spock, the more so because he felt the heavy suspicion he was now under; he was sure they did not now tell him anything.

Then one evening he noticed that his electronic key was missing, a key which could open any door. Only senior officers had one.

He alerted security, obtained another key, and ran to Spock's cabin. The Vulcan was asleep and everything was normal. Kirk settled on a chair in a dark corner without waking Spock and waited, sure his intuition was right.

He was finding the time rather long, though, and nearly fell asleep as he waited. He was jerked back to wakefulness by a soft noise, and the door opened. A man entered stealthily and approached the bed, his hands holding something... a hypo? It did not mean it was McCoy, though, the hypo could have been stolen. Kirk jumped at him, but in the semi-obscurity missed and fell on top of Spock. The culprit fled, dropping the hypo.



"Jim! What?... " asked an astonished Vulcan, waking up to find Kirk lying across him.

The First Officer, after the first feeling of fury at letting the murderer escape, now felt relieved laughter rising in him at the incongruous situation.

"Captain, what pretty pyjamas," he mumbled, giving way to uncontrolled mirth.

"Are you all right, Jim? You did not come to tell me this... "

"No, no." His laughter abating, Kirk seized the hypo. "The usual trick, a bubble of air. It does not mean McCoy, anyone could know how to kill that way with impunity."

"Now they'll know you saved my life."

"Definitely, and I'm relieved in a way. The masquerade is over at last! I don't have to lie any more..." Then he noticed that the Captain had got up and was dressing. "Going somewhere?"

"To the bridge. I am on duty shortly, no point in going back to sleep."

"Sleep! I'll go and get some, that chair was not comfortable!"

"Stay here - sleep in my bed. It could be safer."

"Yes, you're probably right," agreed Kirk gratefully, aware that his Captain would not have made such an offer to anyone else. "Should I get security on to that attempt on your life?"

"I'll see to it, although I doubt that we'll discover the culprit."

"And my key?"

"It'll be back in your quarters by now, as being too dangerous to keep."

Kirk nodded, and undressed quickly. He lay down and shut his eyes, hoping sleep would not be long coming. He felt a light cover being put over him, and opened his eyes, surprising a rare and vivid expression of care in the dark eyes looking down at him. He answered with his warm smile, and murmured, "Thank you, Captain."

"Sleep, Jim." Gentle hands touched his face and Kirk relaxed completely, welcoming the delicate mind touch and letting it soothe him into sleep.

It was on his return to his cabin that he found four grim-faced Humans awaiting him and he knew the moment of truth had come. "To what do I owe the unexpected pleasure of finding you here?" he asked jovially.

"Mr. Kirk," said Scotty, his face and voice grave and severe, "you have been declared a traitor to your people and your race."

"Have I? Thank you for the honour. I was rather tired of playing scum."

"You don't realise the gravity of your situation, Mr. Kirk," said Sulu in a ferocious tone, "you have been condemned to death - an accidental death, of course."

"It figures. Killing always was a favourite Human sport!"

"Don't, Jim," pleaded McCoy, "tell them it is not true, that you made a mistake..."

"When I saved the Captain's life from a vulgar assassin? I meant to save him, and I'm glad I did!"

"You won't be glad when you die instead of him!" sneered Chekov.

"That's where you are wrong, Mr. Chekov," replied Kirk, now serious. "If my life saves his, I'll be glad to die."

"But he is a Vulcan, Jim!" protested McCoy.

"Yes, he's a Vulcan!" snapped Kirk, "and one hair of his head is worth far more than the lot of you put together! You make me sick and ashamed of being Human. You are blind, deaf, unable to see the truth about your Captain, who has never treated you unfairly, and unable to see the truth about yourselves, who always betrayed him!"

"How did he do this to you, Jim?" asked McCoy, genuinely upset. "You were one of us once, a key to our success..."

"Well, I'm glad I ruined this!"

"How did he do this to you?" insisted McCoy. "Vulcans have mind powers..."

"Stop! My mind is my own and I claim full responsibility for my actions. I have done nothing to be ashamed of, which is more than can be said for all of you! Even the natives we met had more humanity than you ever had!"

"So you agree with His Lordship," exclaimed Scotty, "when he called us 'animals'!"

"Yes, I agree!" said Kirk, his tone flat with contained anger. "You, Doctor, calling yourself a 'doctor' and leaving a sick man to die! And Sulu, hitting him and refusing him water. Do you call that Human? In my book, it spells monstrous!"

"But he is a Vulcan, Jim," repeated McCoy.

Kirk sat down, hit by a feeling of utter hopelessness. It was no use, they wouldn't understand, no matter what Spock or himself did!

To the First Officer's surprise, McCoy delayed when the others left. "Jim, I can't understand what happened to you! I tried to tell them the Vulcans had taken your mind over, but they said it made no difference from our point of view."

"It wouldn't. I'm glad they did not believe you."

"They agreed it was possible, but it made you a danger to us just the same, and an enemy, so I couldn't stop the sentence. I'm sorry."

"Who carries out the sentence?"

"The special agents, of course. We don't know who they are."

"Oh... It may not be Scotty or Sulu then..."

"I have no idea, Jim. If either of them was a special agent, he wouldn't tell a soul! Any of us is expected to help if called on to do so, of course."

"Of course. Thanks for the information, Bones, although it is of little use."

"Take care, Jim," whispered McCoy with an anxious look which moved Kirk, "and I hope you'll escape His Lordship's influence and save yourself. Why you had to stop his killer I don't know."

"So you know who it was!" exclaimed Kirk. He had hoped that McCoy...

"And I won't tell! I had hoped to see you safe from him."

"Doctor, does that still mean the Captain is in danger?"

"I have no idea. I've lost interest in the conspiracy, and I mourn the friend I had in you, Jim. Goodbye."

Kirk did not detain him. Friendship between McCoy and himself seemed no longer possible, and he regretted it. If only he could think of a way... But

what could he do?

Kirk's attempt to hide his death sentence from the Captain was useless, for the Vulcan asked him when he arrived on duty if he had heard from the conspirators, and added, "Don't lie to me, please, Mr. Kirk."

"No, Captain. I've been condemned to death as expected, but my death has to be accidental. They may not find it that easy."

"We'll see to it that they find it impossible, Mr. Kirk."

"Captain," said Sirak, "wouldn't the logical answer be to incarcerate the four Humans concerned?"

"No, Mr. Sirak," replied Spock, "because we don't know who would take their place, and any Human could be the chosen assassin. We cannot run this ship with all the Humans in the brig."

"We cannot, Captain, forgive my illogical question."

"From now on, Mr. Kirk," said Spock, "you'll always be accompanied by a Vulcan."

"Captain, that's not fair!" protested Kirk. "It could mean that whoever is with me might be killed."

"True, Mr. Kirk. The best alternative is that you endeavour to be always part of a group, and security will keep a special watch on your movements."

"That is acceptable, Captain - thank you."

Life aboard the Enterprise from then on became less pleasant. Although on the one hand Kirk no longer had to hide his friendship with the Captain and took no more part in apparently joining in the plotting, on the other hand to know that everything could be a death trap was no joke and a strain on the nerves. On top of that, Spock was still a target for all he knew, if only out of revenge, so he kept a close watch on the Vulcan.

The exploration of the sector of space allocated to the ship was now over, and the next order they received from Starfleet was to check the progress of a newly-established colony, a routine mission.

Once in orbit, Spock decided to grant a few days' leave to the crew. The colonists were Andorians and Tellarites, all unlikely to help any Human plot. They found the colonists' settlement flourishing, but the Andorian in charge was not happy.

"Captain Spock, we have only been here a relatively short time and have noticed strange weather readings, so much so that some of our scientists have established a weather base in the desert south of us to make further studies."

"We should check their base and collect their findings," said Spock.

"They were due to call us an hour ago, actually, but it could be radio failure, or even that they forgot! It has happened before."

Spock's communicator bleeped and he answered. "Captain," said Salyk, "the atmosphere of this world has sharply increased in turbulence during the last fifteen minutes."

"Any indication as to why?"

"None at present, sir, but a wind storm seems a likely explanation. The desert area is the most affected."

It had become imperative to check the weather base and Spock took the colonists' craft with Kirk, McCoy and Scotty. McCoy was the only doctor not busy with the colonists and Scotty the only engineer available to do any repair at the weather base should it be needed. Kirk promised himself that he would keep a sharp eye on Spock's phaser this time!

It was with great difficulty that the craft managed to fight the violence of the wind and arrived at the base only to find it deserted. A tape had been left for any possible visitors informing them that the conditions had deteriorated so much, wrecking their radio, that the scientists had abandoned the base to return to the settlement.

"We'll get back as fast as we can," said the Captain, "the storm is getting worse. Just in case, load all the water you can find, and some rations, quickly."

"We might need them!" agreed Kirk, amused by McCoy's and Scotty's amazement to see the Captain carry things too in order to speed up their departure.

They were about half-way back when the wind-storm increased in force in a matter of seconds and became also a raging sandstorm with a speed which threw the craft to the ground like a stone and it opened under the impact of the crash. The passengers were flung about but escaped death thanks to the sand.

Only Scotty was badly hurt, suffering severe concussion, having been thrown against the hull instead of outside. McCoy had a dislocated shoulder, a broken arm and mild concussion, painful but not fatal. Sheltering as best as they could, the Captain tried to raise the ship or the colony, to no avail. The storm's violence was interfering with communications - and probably with the transporter, so they had no choice, and Spock gave the order to take all the water and get ready to leave for the settlement. The craft offered no shelter and the storm could go on for days, by which time they would die of thirst, so they had to try to get back.

"Mr. Kirk," ordered the Captain, "please help me to tear those seats out, we'll make a sledge for Mr. Scott."

"Do you mean you are taking him?" asked McCoy in surprise. Spock did not bother to answer, and neither did Kirk. It was the Captain who settled the wounded man carefully on the improvised sledge as Scotty came to and screamed.

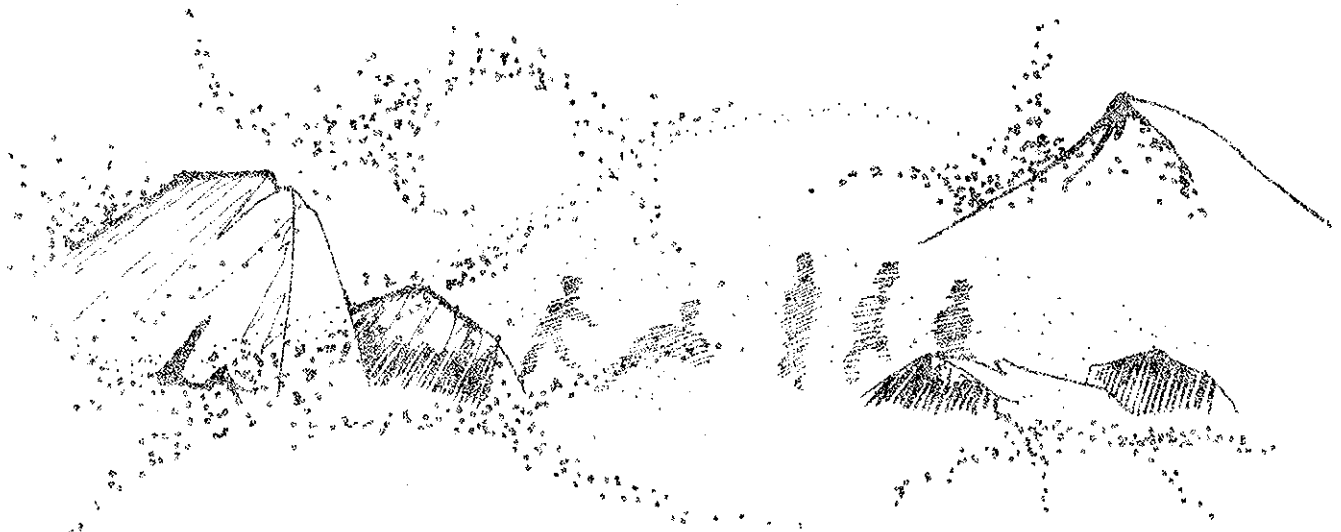
"You're going to bury me here, aren't you? You devil, having your revenge at last! Don't let him, somebody!"

Spock resolutely put both hands on his face and forced him to look up. "Mr. Scott, we are taking you back with us as fast as we can. Please collaborate if you can by keeping still or you could make the sledge turn over."

"You do mean that, don't you?" Scotty begged. "You would not leave me behind?"

"No, Mr. Scott, you have my word."

The Scotsman was staring into the Vulcan's eyes as though hypnotised and his features relaxed slowly, murmuring in a dreamy voice, "Aye, Captain, somehow I know you'll keep your word."



Kirk nodded to Spock, maybe he had got through! But Scotty was partly delirious and might not remember much of the adventure.

"Jim," asked McCoy in an aside as they finished carrying the water, "does he mean to take Scotty all the way? Isn't he playing about?"

"Vulcans don't play about, Doctor, the Captain means what he says."

They set off at a pace very much slowed by the soft sand and the still raging storm and Spock dragged the sledge most of the time, he alone had the strength, the others could hardly move against the ferocious wind and Kirk had to help McCoy. Each had water rations, and they were soon exhausted. After another day of slow and nightmarish progress, with the sand-storm abating but the wind just as violent, McCoy was also becoming feverish and badly affected.

"Scotty will never make it! We'll die! We'll all die!" he suddenly shouted. Kirk slapped him hard, which made the doctor crawl away from him as they rested for a brief period.

The Scotsman moved and begged for water, and McCoy watched Spock give him some in disbelief, then saw a small cup handed to him. Kirk tried to refuse his, but Spock insisted. "Jim, I could not carry you, so please drink it."

"Jim, it is his water," murmured McCoy in complete bewilderment.

"Yes, and he did not make anyone beg for it!" retorted Kirk.

The troubled expression in the doctor's eyes might mean he was starting to understand, but would he remember? He was only semi-conscious most of the time now, his eyes glazed, and it was probable that everything had the quality of a dream - or a nightmare - to him.

The storm abated a little more. By their instruments they were about five miles from the settlement. "Mr. Kirk," said Spock, "I'll go on alone or we'll never make it in time for Mr. Scott, and perhaps the Doctor. Stay here by those dead trees; I'll return as soon as I can."

"Are you sure you'll be able to?"

"Yes, this desert is only slightly worse than any on Vulcan."

"So that's it," said McCoy dully, "you'll leave us here to rot!"

The doctor looked up, startled by the very light touch on his feverish face, and like Scotty, seemed hypnotised by the dark eyes of the Vulcan.

"Doctor, I will come back, you have my word as an officer and a Vulcan. Do you believe me?"

"Yes, I do," murmured McCoy. He watched Spock leave at a fast pace and looked at Kirk with a very troubled expression. "Jim, his eyes... they were not cold... and his touch... so gentle... "

"Yes, Doctor. He'll come back, rest until he does."

Scotty seemed in a coma and McCoy was trying to sleep when the Captain returned after such a short while that Kirk guessed something was wrong.

"I can't get through," explained Spock. "Part of the ground has caved in and forms a deep ravine no-one could get across without equipment. I tried again to raise the ship, but without success."

"We'll die, we'll all die!" screamed McCoy until Kirk slapped him again and he fell back muttering in his delirium.

"There is only one way. I must try to contact the ship mentally."

"Do you think you can?"

"I don't know, but I must try. It is also possible the senior officers are trying to reach me, which will help."

"Dr. Syvik may still be at the colony, Captain."

"True, I'll try him first, it is nearer."

Kirk watched him worriedly, aware of the expenditure of energy this demanded from Spock, when he could not spare that much. Luckily it worked and the Vulcan doctor informed the ship. As the storm was abating at last, they were pinpointed and beamed up successfully.

While Scotty had to be kept in sickbay for some time, McCoy recovered very quickly and Kirk awaited any signs of improvement in their attitude with bated breath. Surely both would have understood by now that Vulcans were not monsters - or would they? But his high hopes were soon dashed to the ground. Scotty remembered nothing after the crash, and McCoy's memory was vague and patchy, although he did remember a few things, like Spock giving him water, for instance.

"But he could have made me imagine it, Jim, that would be easy for a telepath."

Kirk had to make a great effort not to show his anger. "And the sores on his chest due to dragging the sledge, is that imaginary also?"

"No, Jim, and I agree he did not try to abandon any of us to save himself, but he couldn't, being the Captain. It would have been a smear on his brilliant record to lose two men, even two Humans." Kirk however had the impression that McCoy was talking to convince himself, so he might have started thinking - there was hope.

"Jim," said McCoy as he left, "I don't care what you did, I don't want you to be killed. Take care, and if poison is used, call me fast; I have a fair idea which one they might use, and will keep antidotes at hand."

Kirk was reminded with a start about his death sentence. "Poison? That would be murder, not 'accident'."

"Not if the poison disappeared so quickly that your death appeared to be natural."

"I see. Thanks, Doctor."

Kirk communicated the information to the Captain.

"Can we trust him to save you if such a method is used?" asked Spock.

"Yes, he did not have to tell me."

As soon as the next day, Kirk was in his quarters with the Captain, going over some calculations, when Spock asked, "May I have a pencil, please?"

Kirk opened his desk drawer and felt a sharp pain in his hand. He lifted it quickly, staring at the small wound in the palm.

"Jim! What is it?" But Spock saw the wound as he spoke.

Kirk put his other hand to his head. "I feel faint... Poison?" He swayed and the Vulcan made him sit, called McCoy by intercom and put his lips to the wound without hesitation to suck the poison if possible, after having widened the cut and applied pressure to the artery in the arm to stop the flow of blood.

So it was a rather unexpected scene which faced McCoy when he arrived, the Captain apparently kissing Kirk's palm with deep concentration! But he lost no time in comments as he gave Kirk two injections. Spock released the hand and arm and McCoy said approvingly, "You acted fast, Captain, I doubt that much poison got through, but it might have been enough. My hypo took care of that, I hope."

"You hope!" nearly shouted Spock, seizing McCoy roughly by the arm. "That is not good enough, Doctor! Certainty is what I want, and if Jim dies, I can assure you that whoever is responsible will regret it, yourself included, for not having saved him."

Stupefied by the violent emotion visible for once in the Captain and the

terrible anger in the usually cold eyes, and aware that the words were no empty threat, McCoy swallowed and stammered, "I'll do my best, Captain... He should be all right... You helped by acting so fast. I'll put him on the bed..."

"No!" Spock pushed him away and picked Kirk up himself, carried him to the bed and laid him down with such care that McCoy stared unbelievably. "Anything else you can do, Doctor?" asked Spock.

"No, sir. He'll probably have a fever but it should be over quickly and there should be no ill-effects by tomorrow."

"I hope that you are right for your sake, Doctor. You may go..."

"He should not be left alone, sir," interrupted McCoy.

"He won't be, I'll stay with him."

"You?...!"

"Any objections?"

"No, no, Captain, I just... didn't expect... May I check on Mr. Kirk in about an hour? I might be able to relieve the fever and want to make sure he is O.K."

"Yes, that will be in order. Report to Dr. Syvik and give him your hypo to analyse; two security guards are waiting outside to escort you."

"Captain, I would never..."

"Wouldn't you? Are you able to give me one single reason why I should trust you?"

"... No, sir," murmured McCoy, looking down, and leaving dejectedly. Once out of the room, he made no resistance, not that it would have been any use against two Vulcans, and surrendered the hypo to the Vulcan doctor. Dr. Syvik, to Spock's relief, confirmed that the hypo had contained two powerful antidotes for use in counteracting poisons.

McCoy did call back an hour later and found Kirk looking feverish, as expected, but asleep.

"May I stay for a while, sir?" asked McCoy in a low voice, his eyes pleading. "He is my friend..."

"Yes, Doctor, you may stay," agreed Spock.

"Thank you, sir," whispered McCoy, sitting down on the other side of the bed.

Whether disturbed by the doctor's entrance, Kirk moved and became agitated. Spock immediately sat on the bed and touched his face. Kirk woke up and gripped the soothing hand. "Spock... Nightmare... Someone killing..."

"It's all right, Jim, I am here."

"Yes, I know... I felt you were near..." His eyes saw McCoy and he started. "Why is he here?"

"He saved you, Jim."

"No, you saved me... I felt you... suck the poison..."

"It might not have been enough without McCoy, Jim."

But Kirk did not seem to hear and became agitated again. "Make him go away ... Stay, Spock..."

"He'll go soon, Jim. You should sleep, let me help you."

"Yes, please."

McCoy watched, fascinated, as the Captain touched Kirk's face gently and the Human put his own hands over the Vulcan's as though to feel them more. His features relaxed into a half-smile directed at Spock and he fell asleep.

"Perhaps you should leave before he wakes up again, Doctor," said Spock with a hint of apology. "He did not mean..."

"I'll go, Captain," agreed McCoy. "He does not need me any longer. But please tell me, what did you do just now?"

"It was a mind touch projecting soothing thoughts; why do you ask?"

"Jim was not frightened..."

"Why should he be?"

The doctor did not answer, and left, his features set in a puzzled frown. Obviously, Kirk's lack of fear of telepathy was a mystery to him.

Kirk recovered by the next day as McCoy predicted and apologised to the doctor for his unkind words.

"Forget it, Jim, you were ill."

"You saved my life nevertheless, Bones."

"The Captain helped. Do you know, Jim, he really cares for you!"

"That's no news to me," smiled Kirk.

"I never thought a Vulcan... Don't you find the telepathic contact distasteful?"

"No, on the contrary, it is a far more truthful way of communicating if you think about it, the partners can't lie."

"I suppose they can't! I never thought of that... Anyway, I'm probably in the same boat as you by now."

"You mean they'll try again to kill me, and you too?"

"Not yet, or it would be too obvious."

Kirk felt deeply moved by the real friendship McCoy had for him; if only it included Spock! But a seed had started to grow in the doctor's mind, of that he was sure, so there was hope - at least there was, if they escaped assassination! And Spock was probably still a target for revenge. But Vulcan security officers were becoming very watchful, on the Captain's orders, so chances of success were greatly reduced for any would-be assassin.

The Enterprise was on her way to Earth for shore leave and Kirk was looking forward to showing his home planet to Spock, when it was cancelled. A call from Sarek came through and Spock asked Kirk to his quarters to listen.

"Captain, Commander," said Sarek with a hint of apology in the well-known, even voice, "I regret that I have to postpone your shore leave, but circumstances beyond my control compel me to order the Enterprise to the mining colony of Planet Rexel, the co-ordinates of which are being transmitted at this moment."

"If my memory serves me, sir," said Spock, "planet Rexel is quite a long distance..."

"I am well aware of the fact, Captain, but you are the nearest available Starship nevertheless. The Klingons have been sighted in another area and I had to divert several Starships there. Others are on vital missions. It leaves the Enterprise."

"I understand, sir."

"Thank you, Captain. Please proceed to Rexel at top speed; details of the situation there are being transmitted, and it is critical."

"Yes, sir." Spock gave the necessary orders. "Now let us look at the situation which awaits us on planet Rexel."

The mining colony there was well-established and had been no problem up to

now. But an earthquake had damaged a lot of equipment including the central computer, and several of their scientists and engineers had been killed, so they were in dire need of assistance to get into production again before too much loss ruined the colony. On top of that, an epidemic had started and medical assistance was also needed urgently.

"They are in a bad way!" exclaimed Kirk with a frown.

"I have ordered maximum speed, Mr. Kirk. What is worrying you?"

"I'm not sure, Captain. It seems such a lot of things to have happened."

"I agree it is uncommon, but there is always the random factor..."

"Yes, they were unlucky, I suppose."

"Unlucky? I fail..."

"You would!" smiled Kirk. "Luck is a Human superstition."

The mining colony was a Human one, which did not reassure Kirk, but to assume a link between it and the conspirators aboard was far-fetched! Once they had established orbit, Spock contacted the colonists and their leader sounded pleased at their arrival.

"We do need assistance fast, Captain Spock. I hope you'll send your best scientists and engineers to help. Medical assistance would also be appreciated, although the epidemic is now contained."

"I'll beam down shortly with the first group to see for myself and organise the assistance, sir."

"Thank you, Captain, you'll be most welcome."

Spock cut the communication and saw Kirk approach him, frowning heavily. "Captain, I don't like it!"

"A very Human statement, Mr. Kirk," said Spock with the hint of a smile. "Please specify."

Kirk smiled back and answered. "That's difficult, but I'll try. First, the colonist's voice sounded off key, forced, as though he wanted to impress us with the emergency knowing there was none. Second, to ask for the best scientists and engineers means that most top officers would be down there, and we know from records that Klingons have been sighted in this area."

"You believe it to be a trap if I read you correctly, Mr. Kirk."

"Yes, Captain, but I am not at all sure. It could be genuine."

"When dealing with Humans, it is perhaps logical to rely on Human intuition. We cannot however refuse assistance. Mr. Salyk, any unusual readings on that planet?"

"None, sir."

"Any other vessel in the area?"

"Negative, sir."

"May I make a suggestion, Captain?" asked Kirk.

"By all means, Mr. Kirk."

"Let me beam down with a small party of Humans only - this is a Human colony after all. If everything is genuine, I'll call for further personnel. If it is a trap to kill aliens, they'll be disappointed!"

"There is some merit in what you propose, Mr. Kirk, and I agree, but I will lead the landing party."

"No, sir, you should remain..."

"I have stated my decision, Mr. Kirk, it is final. Please select the other members of the landing party."

"Yes, Captain."

Kirk selected the landing party; McCoy, Scotty, Sulu, Chekov and himself apart from Spock. He was glad to be handed a phaser this time, by the Captain's special rulings; it meant that Spock was taking his intuition seriously, and perhaps also sensed that something was wrong? Kirk hoped his fear was groundless, he had enough Humans to contend with already!

They beamed down to the edge of the colonists' town, which was quite large, not far from the mines. The colonists' leader was awaiting them.

"Welcome, Captain Spock, my name is Frank. I'll lead you to the mines to see the situation, but why... Are these Humans your best people?"

"The best among Humans, Mr. Frank. My First Officer, Commander Kirk; Dr. McCoy, Lts. Scott and Sulu and Ensign Chekov."

"Welcome, Gentlemen. Let's go."

The man looked troubled and Kirk checked his phaser unobtrusively. The Captain must have had the same impression because he took his communicator and held it hidden inside his hand.

"This way, Gentlemen," said Frank, stepping aside to let them go into the dark tunnel.

"After you, sir," said Spock with his usual politeness. This clearly bothered the man, and Kirk seized him roughly.

"What are you playing at? You go first or we don't go in at all!"

The colonist shook himself free and unexpectedly ran off fast. "It does not matter," said a new voice in an arrogant tone. "Stay where you are and drop your weapons and communicators, all of you."

They looked up to see several Klingons on top of the mine entrance and on rocks nearby, all fully armed, their weapons aimed at the group. The surrounding landscape looked very crowded suddenly!

"I should have known a Human would be a filthy traitor!" said Kirk with anger, obeying the order and noticing that Spock had kept his communicator. The Klingon did not bother to count them, fortunately.

"Only two phasers!" laughed the Klingon officer. "This is too easy, like capturing lambs!"

"I am Captain Spock of the USS Enterprise," stated Spock formally and with great politeness. "Who do I have the honour of addressing?"

"Commander Korth," replied the Klingon, a little taken aback.

"Commander, may I ask what you are doing in Federation territory?"

"We want your ship, Captain. We are tired of being out-run by Starfleet vessels, so we baited this trap and you fell into it. The Klingon Fleet is at this very minute on its way to capture your ship."

"Thank you, Commander, a most enlightening answer," said Spock, his open communicator having transmitted it all. "Enterprise, leave immediately, alert Starfleet and stay away until..."

The Klingon, incredulous at first when faced with such audacity as a prisoner Captain transmitting orders to his ship, reacted at last and fired at Spock who fell without a sound.

"Spock!" shouted Kirk, running to him and falling to his knees, overwhelmed by grief.

"He is only stunned," said Korth, "I did not stop to change the setting of

my weapon. I'm glad; he should not die quickly. The sheer effrontery of that Vulcan is unbelievable! Making me answer questions and giving orders... " The Klingon stopped for a second, choking with fury, then continued, "It may cost me my life if I fail, thanks to him! But perhaps the ship has not left after all... "

"The ship has left," stated Kirk, "Captain's orders are obeyed!"

"Most unfortunate for you all! Into that tunnel! You'll find it difficult to escape from your prison... "

Kirk bent to pick Spock up. "Not him! Get to the entrance of the tunnel, all of you, and fast, or I fire!"

They obeyed, Kirk desperately trying to see a way of getting a weapon, but they were surrounded and watched closely; it was hopeless. He joined the others, and Korth took a dagger from his belt and with deadly ferocity plunged it into Spock.

"No!" screamed Kirk, throwing himself at the Klingon only to fall stunned by his fire.

"Carry that fool and get into the tunnel," ordered the Klingon. "The Vulcan stays here to die."

The Humans obeyed and found themselves on a sort of conveyor belt, but had no time to think further as the opening shut. They were plunged into darkness and the floor under them started moving fast. They had to spend all their energy on keeping their balance as the fantastic journey went on and on and on, always in darkness, until it stopped suddenly and they fell, rolling down a steep slope to end up in a heap against a pile of stones.

It was pitch dark and their only safe guess was that they were underground. Trying to find the conveyor belt again proved fruitless, it had disappeared. Several tunnels were discovered by touch, but which one, if any, led to the surface was anyone's guess. By the time their journey had taken, Scotty estimated that they must be at least ten miles down, if not more, and the maze of tunnels made escape hopeless, they would only get lost - not that they were not lost already!

Chekov started shaking with fear and crying and McCoy had to slap him as Kirk revived and murmured, "Spock?"

"The Captain is still outside, Jim," replied McCoy, "and better off than we are!"

"With a dagger in him?" exclaimed Kirk as memory flooded back.

"Well... all right, he is no better off, then."

"Never mind him," said Scotty, "we must try getting out."

"Why?" asked Sulu. "It is hopeless. We'll get exhausted for nothing."

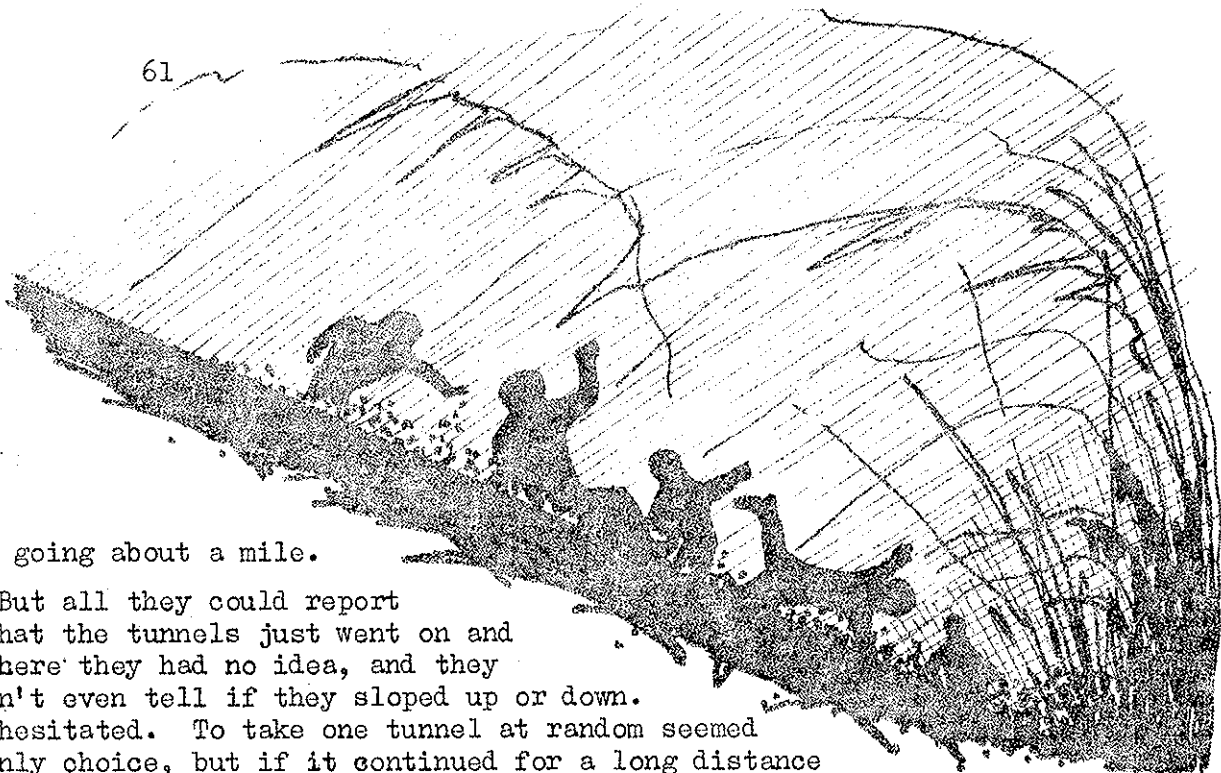
"I don't want to die like a rat in a hole," protested Scotty.

Why not? thought Kirk, you are a rat! His head ached, and he kept seeing the Klingon plunging the dagger into Spock with renewed horror. He should have stopped it somehow, anticipating the move and throwing himself in front of his Captain if nothing else. The fact that his reason told him he would never have made it did not help; Spock was dying and he could do nothing!

He became conscious of a violent altercation between Scotty and Sulu while Chekov started crying and screaming again.

"Jim, do something, they'll go mad and kill each other!" begged McCoy.

Who cares? thought Kirk in a first reaction of annoyance at being distracted from his grief, but his sense of duty immediately asserted itself and he took charge, giving each one the task of exploring one tunnel and returning



after going about a mile.

But all they could report was that the tunnels just went on and on, where they had no idea, and they couldn't even tell if they sloped up or down. Kirk hesitated. To take one tunnel at random seemed the only choice, but if it continued for a long distance and arrived nowhere, they would not make it back, not that it mattered.

He tried to clear his head of the dull ache caused by the stun, and it went, just like that. How on Earth... A strange feeling had replaced the ache, something trying to come to the surface of his mind. Something - or someone?

"Spock!" he exclaimed, to the others' amazement.

"Are you all right, Jim?" asked Spock's voice in his mind.

"Yes, fine," he replied also in his mind only. "You?"

"Not important at the moment. Where are you?"

"Look into my mind and see for yourself. Some underground maze, a very efficient prison, so efficient that we'll die trying to escape, or we'll die if we stay put!"

"I can help if I take over your mind, show you the direction of my thoughts."

"Fine, but... can you do it?"

"Yes, just let yourself be guided."

"You are hurt, you can't spare so much energy."

"Am I to let you all die?"

"You win, as usual, Captain. What about the Klingons?"

"There are none nearby, my guess is that they have left."

"Back to their ship? Hope you're right! Let's start," said Kirk, eager to get it over with quickly to make the strain on Spock as short as possible.

He explained what had happened in a few words to the Humans, and they wouldn't believe him at first. "You are having hallucinations, Jim, after-effect from that stun..."

"No, I'm not, Bones. I'll lead you out of here - or rather, your Captain will lead us all, through my mind. Let's go."

"We have nothing to lose," shrugged McCoy, "even if he is imagining things!" The others could only agree and followed Kirk. They soon had to admit that there must be something to it when after about an hour's progress, they felt they were going upwards.

"Hurry! Faster!" ordered Kirk, aware of some awful strain Spock was trying

to keep hidden. He drove them on relentlessly and the fear of being left behind was a spur for any would-be slowcoach.

"Jim, not so fast, please," panted McCoy after another couple of hours had passed, but Scotty exclaimed,

"I can see light through there!"

This spurred them on anew and Kirk felt Spock's grip slacken. "Jim... I can't... You are very near now."

"We'll make it, Captain, let go," agreed Kirk. "We'll be with you soon." As he felt the wrench caused by Spock's withdrawal, he thought he heard the faint words,

"Goodbye, Jim."

No longer taking notice of whether he was followed, Kirk ran up the last slope as though all the demons of hell were after him, and pushed the huge rock blocking the entrance, in spite of his bursting lungs.

They were near where they had been forced underground; a quick look showed no Klingons about, and he ran to the Vulcan who was at the place where he had seen him fall.

"Spock!"

The dagger was still buried deep in him and a pool of green blood could be seen by his side. His face was deathly pale and Kirk noticed with fury that his hands had been lashed to a couple of tree stumps so that he could not move. Kirk fumbled the knots loose and touched his friend's face with trembling hands.

"Jim," murmured Spock, without opening his eyes.

"I'm here, Captain. McCoy will be here in a minute."

"No need... I will not... be going back to my ship."

"Of course you will!"

"I can't... healing... trance..." He coughed, and Kirk saw the blood on his lips with fear, and wiped it hurriedly away.

"Don't talk, please," he begged, and the fact that the Vulcan did not answer proved that he probably could not. Where was McCoy?

The doctor arrived at last and ran his scanner, then looked at Kirk with some hesitation. "Jim, I think he is... dying."

"I know he is," agreed Kirk, his voice flat and dead. The others had arrived also but he hardly noticed as he added, "He should have gone into a healing trance, instead of which he fought it to lead us back here. Now he is too weak to initiate the trance."

"You mean he could have saved himself and he did not?" asked Scotty, incredulous.

"He could have saved himself," admitted McCoy. "The knife penetrated a lung and he was left to bleed to death. A trance would have kept him from losing that blood, although it wouldn't actually have healed the wound while the knife was still stuck in him."

"But it would have killed us," finished Kirk in his dead voice. "He resisted the trance for our sake, bought our lives with his."

His eyes absently took in the stunned expressions around him. Perhaps they understood at last! He had wished to find a way to make them understand, but not this, not with his Captain's life! Choking back his grief, Kirk asked, "Doctor, can't you help him at all?"

"I have no facilities here, Jim. There's not much I can try..."

"Try what you can, for God's sake!"

"There should be a hospital in the colonists' town," Chekov suggested.

"Of course! We'll take him, provided the Klingons are away. Let's go."

McCoy applied a special pad to the wound to stop any further bleeding and they carried Spock with great care to the nearby town, not far, fortunately. The colonists stared at them, amazed and yet apparently relieved, but Kirk gave no explanation as he borrowed a craft to finish the journey to the hospital. The pilot told them the Klingons had arrived unexpectedly ~~some~~ weeks previously and had taken hostages to enforce the colonists' unwilling collaboration, but they had left now, probably back to their ship once the trap had been sprung, so it was one worry less. Their attempt to contact the Enterprise met with silence so the Captain would have to be saved by Human hands.

The hospital had very good facilities and McCoy took charge and did all he could for Spock while the others watched in awed silence, probably still shocked by recent events and discoveries.

But soon, the doctor looked at Kirk dejectedly. "It's no use, Jim, I can't help him."

"Do you mean you won't?" shouted Kirk in a blind fury. "I'll kill you if you don't save him!"

The others restrained him. McCoy had not defended himself and the First Officer had nearly strangled him. "Jim, I swear I did all I could, and if my death helped him, I'd accept it," said McCoy with great dignity. "You were right, he is worth more than the rest of us put together."

"He saved us," murmured Scotty, still incredulous, "after the way we treated him, too..."

Kirk hardly heard. He no longer cared if they understood or not. Spock was dying and he could not stop it! A sob escaped him and he leaned on the bed, hiding his face.

Timidly, McCoy put his hand on his shoulder. "I'm really sorry, Jim. If only the Enterprise had returned, a Vulcan doctor might... Maybe not, though, I don't know..."

"How could a Vulcan help him?" asked Kirk, lifting his head.

"I'm not sure, but I have heard... He's in a coma I can't raise him from long enough to initiate a healing trance, he's too weak even to start it let alone maintain it. A Vulcan mind might be able to help him through telepathy, although it could be dangerous when the Captain is so weak and dying."

"A Vulcan might help him," Kirk repeated. "Maybe I could help him!"

"Jim, you're crazy! You would die with him, he would drag you into death!"

"What if he did? So be it, I'll die with him then," said Kirk, his voice suddenly firm and resolute.

"No, I can't let you..."

"Dr. McCoy, it is my duty to save my Captain if I can. You will not interfere. That is an order." His tone was so determined that McCoy stepped back.

"Mr. Kirk, you might as well commit suicide," protested Scotty.

"No, Mr. Scott. The Captain saved my life - now I'll save his if I am able, or die with him! It is what I want. Will any of you interfere with the one chance to save your Captain?"

"No, Jim," replied McCoy softly. "We have not the right to interfere. Go ahead."

"Thanks, Bones," smiled Kirk. McCoy smiled back, unable to speak.

Kirk forgot his audience to concentrate on saving his Captain. He had to reach him, but he found that with Spock unconscious he could not; he was not telepathic!

McCoy understood his difficulty. "Jim, I may be able to help. If I give him an injection to raise him from the coma for a few minutes, enough time to make contact with your mind..."

"Yes, that's it! If he could initiate the meld, I might be able to do the rest."

McCoy gave the injection, and Spock's eyes opened.

"Captain, quickly, mind meld with me," said Kirk urgently.

But the Vulcan understood. "No, Jim, I won't, or you'll die too."

"This is no time to be stubborn, Spock! See my mind, see that I want to help you or die with you! It's what you would do in my place. Do you think so little of me that you'll refuse me the same privilege? Besides, you are my Captain - it is your duty to accept my help!" Kirk finished triumphantly.

"As you wish, Jim," murmured Spock, too weak not to be overwhelmed by the arguments, and letting his hands be put on Kirk's face.

"Thanks, Spock. We'll live or die together."

Kirk felt the mind contact and concentrated all his energy on it in order to make the link strong. He sensed that the Captain was slipping back already and hung on, following his friend's mind but trying to channel more energy into it. Pain suddenly assailed him, violent pain Spock had tried desperately to shield him from but was unable to.

Kirk nearly screamed, but hung on, shouting mentally, "Don't think about me, Spock, concentrate on getting enough energy from my mind to initiate the healing trance."

The Vulcan tried, but so weakly that he achieved nothing and Kirk's energy was being drained at such a fast rate just stopping Spock from sinking back into a coma that the First Officer knew he could not go on much longer. His whole body was a mass of pain and his head ached and burned; he felt weak and helpless and drawn further and further into what he knew was death for both of them.

The stress eased a little and Kirk realised that Spock was trying to sever the link and release him.

"Oh no you don't!" he said fiercely. "We'll both live or we'll both die!"

"Then we'll both die, Jim, I can't..."

Kirk sensed such desperation behind the halting words that he had to assuage it. "Let's stop fighting death, Spock, what is the point if we have no chance? We might as well use what time we have left to share our thoughts..."

"No, I will not let you die!" stated Spock, with such an upsurge of energy that Kirk expected to feel a considerable drain, and yet he felt little. The meld enabled him to see that Spock was literally using his whole self to fight, down to the basic emotion of survival, or in his case, survival of his friend.

"Go on, Captain, we're not beaten yet! Together we can face anything. Are we to let an inconvenience like death win?" But behind the light words, his determination equalled Spock's; he desperately wanted to save his friend. With a tremendous effort, he channelled what energy he could muster to the Vulcan's mind.

Their combined desperate effort seemed to pay off. He sensed the healing trance starting with joy.

"Thank you, Jim, I'll try to manage now," murmured Spock. Kirk knew however that the battle was not over for the Captain; how could he maintain the trance? He could no longer help, he had no strength left at all. In fact, he

was the one sinking into a coma.

Kirk did not hear the anxious comments around them as McCoy said dully, "I think they are both dying, and there is nothing we can do!"

Chekov, who had the task of attempting to raise the Enterprise at regular intervals with a communicator borrowed from the colonists, called out with sudden excitement, "She's back!"

McCoy grabbed the communicator. "Dr. McCoy here. Emergency! Vulcan medical team urgently needed!"

"Beaming down, Doctor," was the calm reply to be expected from a Vulcan.

In a matter of minutes, the air hummed around them and no less than Admiral Sarek materialised, as well as Dr. Syvik and several other Vulcans. They hardly listened to McCoy as they hastened to the patients and the Vulcan doctor ran a quick check on the Human while Sarek put his hands to Spock's face.

After a few minutes of deep concentration, the Admiral stated, "The Captain is in a healing trance. I have supplied enough strength for him to maintain it for several hours."

"We'll keep a tight check over him sir," assured a Vulcan doctor as Sarek turned to the other bed Kirk had been put on.

"The Commander is extremely weak, sir," said Dr. Syvik, "so weak I'm afraid the shock of a telepathic contact from an unknown mind might kill him."

"Let me try, Doctor," said Sarek. "I'm married to a Human, therefore I have some knowledge of a Human mind."

"Logical, sir," agreed Dr. Syvik, moving back to make way for the Admiral.

Kirk, floating in a strange haze of weakness and exhaustion, suddenly sensed the contact, a very gentle and delicate touch... Spock? But the Captain was in a trance... It was not Spock, and yet there was something familiar about the mind meeting his own, very slowly and with such care that Kirk welcomed it. The haze vanished as though by magic and all weakness and exhaustion were being rapidly eliminated, strength was flowing into him at an increasing speed.

"At this rate," he said aloud, "I'll be able to tackle even a Vulcan in hand to hand combat!"

"I would not advise it, Mr. Kirk," said an even voice as the contact stopped. Kirk opened his eyes and met Sarek's with a start.

"Sir... I'm sorry... " he mumbled, trying to adapt to reality and make the Vulcan salute.

"Officers in a horizontal position are excused from saluting," said Sarek, with the hint of amusement Kirk had come to detect.

"Thank you, sir. Spock?... I mean, how is the Captain?"

"He will be out of the trance by tomorrow, Commander. You did well."

"Did I? I'm not so sure... "

"You enabled him to initiate the trance, Mr. Kirk," explained Dr. Syvik. "In his weakened state, it would have taken him a long time, but he would probably have survived."

"While you would not have, Commander," finished Sarek. "I regret I had to contact your mind without permission."

"It would be illogical of me to complain, sir."

"Agreed, Mr. Kirk. We'll beam up and let both of you recuperate finally in sickbay."

McCoy was overjoyed to be put in charge of the two patients and Kirk submitted with good enough grace to the building up treatment, thankful however when

he was pronounced fit.

"Do you know, Jim, the Admiral is not such a bad sort under that frozen mask..."

"I should say not, he saved my life!"

"Yes, he did, didn't he? And you saved the Captain's... after he saved us ... Why on Earth I ever thought that telepathy was an evil thing I don't know!"

"Neither do I," agreed Kirk. "Telepathy could be evil, Bones, but the Vulcans have a very high code of ethics and don't spy on thoughts."

"I realise this now, but you get such rumours on Earth... The Captain will come out of the trance soon, I think. Would you believe a maniac sneaked in to try to kill both of you?"

"Oh!... Where is he?"

"In that bed having a good sleep to cool off! By the time I've finished with him, he'll have learned a few things, if I have to keep him here for weeks!"

Kirk laughed. "So the Vulcans have found a champion!"

"Well, they had a pretty good one already, Jim."

"Who?"

"Yourself, of course! I should have known you'd not betray us for evil beings, therefore they were good - a logical deduction, the Captain would say."

"And the others?"

"Well, it'll take a while, but their minds are starting to work. Scotty will soon come round, he's a good man at heart. Chekov was too young to know better, and followed Sulu like a sheep. Now he's starting to think for himself. Sulu will take longer, but even he was shaken by the Captain saving us."

"Hope at last!" sighed Kirk. "Hope for all the Humans, perhaps. Maybe they'll judge Vulcans by their actions now, not words and..." He stopped, as Spock was coming out of the trance. "Go on, Doctor, hit him!" he urged.

"I'd rather not!"

Kirk smiled and administered the required slaps. "Feeling all right, Captain?"

"Yes, thank you, Mr. Kirk. I am gratified to see that you suffered no ill effects either."

"I feel fine, the Doctor..."

He was interrupted by the intercom. "Captain Spock and Commander Kirk are asked to report to Admiral Sarek as soon as they are pronounced fit for duty."

The two officers beamed aboard the flagship where the Admiral congratulated them on having defeated the Klingon plot, and he went on to explain how Starfleet had managed to surprise the Klingon Fleet and put it to flight. "I doubt that the Klingons will reappear in this quadrant of space in the near future," finished Sarek. "May I thank you both on behalf of Starfleet."

"We only did our duty, sir," replied Spock.

"Nevertheless," said Sarek, "citations will be bestowed on you both."

"Thank you sir. I'm pleased to report that a few Humans are starting to understand that an alien-Human relationship is possible," Kirk said.

"That is very good news, Mr. Kirk, thank you. Perhaps the first step has been taken towards Human rehabilitation and equality with other races. I trust you suffered no ill-effects from the mind meld?"

"With you, sir? No, none at all, and may I say that your mind resembles the Captain's mind."

"To be expected, Commander, he is my son. And now I will not detain you further; my orders are to proceed at maximum speed for your postponed shore leave on Earth."

"Thank you, sir," said Spock. Lifting his hand in the Vulcan salute, he added, "Live long and prosper, sir."

Sarek also saluted. "Live long and prosper, Captain, Commander. I believe the correct Earth expression is 'Enjoy your shore leave'!"

Even before they reached Earth, the Human crew, informed by McCoy and the others of recent events, was responding to Vulcan command without so much animosity, and no-one dared call the Captain 'His Lordship' any longer - at least in the hearing of his champions. Many Earthmen remained suspicious, however, and said the four officers concerned had been tricked by some Vulcan power, but even they were not sure of Vulcan evil any more and started to observe the aliens with a slightly more open mind. It was a beginning.

Both McCoy and Scotty were discovering that Dr. Syvik and Lt. Commander Senak were just as interested in their jobs as they were, and collaborated in earnest. Chekov was more and more fascinated by the extent of the knowledge Vulcans had of computers, and started studying the Vulcan language in order to be able to read their scientific papers without any need for translation. Even Sulu showed signs of reform when he called on Kirk and informed him that if he beamed down on Earth, he would be executed.

"You're still under sentence of death, Mr. Kirk, and as it is now difficult for any agent aboard to carry it out, your leave offers the opportunity for Earth agents to engineer an accident, probably for the Captain as well, who is believed to have taken your mind over."

"So much for our leave, then!" muttered Kirk sombrely. "Why did you warn me, Mr. Sulu?"

"I... like to repay debts, sir," replied Sulu, rather embarrassed, "and the Captain would not want you killed... and he saved my life! But the debt is repaid now, I'm free."

"To plot further?"

"No, sir, I have been suspended temporarily from the party, and may be expelled for failure to accomplish my mission. I have to admit that the Captain is not perhaps as bad as I thought, but he is half-Human, and I reserve judgement about aliens."

Which is better than nothing! thought Kirk, watching him go.

He reported the conversation to the Captain who looked faintly disturbed. "I regret that your friendship with me is now depriving you of leave, Mr. Kirk,"

"I don't mind on my account, my parents are dead and I never got on with my brother. But I wanted you to see Earth, Captain..."

"I know it through my mother and through yourself," said Spock softly, "and this way it may appear to be a better world than the real one."

"You could be right, Captain," agreed Kirk with a smile. "And the Enterprise feels more like home, because the Human crew is no longer so antagonistic."

"True. Our task has been given a strong start; we must see to it that it continues."

"Yes, Captain, you can count on me."

When he heard, McCoy was so upset that he went to the Captain's quarters,

where Kirk also happened to be, and refused shore leave also, but he blamed both Humans and Vulcans for the mishap, his anger making him temporarily forget his fear of the Captain.

"Logic is all very well, but there are times when enough is enough, Captain. Humans should be allowed normal emotions..."

"Bones!" said Kirk in a warning tone.

But the doctor was not to be stopped and continued defiantly, "For instance, when I met Jim as he arrived aboard, it was normal for us to show our joy at meeting again - in fact, it was normal courtesy by Human standards to greet each other - and yet I was reprimanded..."

"That will do, Dr. McCoy," interrupted Kirk severely, "You're addressing the Captain."

Spock was sitting at his desk, and watching the doctor over steepled fingers, his eyes expressionless as usual. McCoy realised at last that he had gone too far and started to apologise, but the Captain stopped him.

"You may have a valid point, Doctor, and it is possible that discipline does not make enough allowance for Human nature. I will bear what you said in mind."

The doctor's open mouth, indicating his amazement plainly, looked so funny that Kirk smiled as Spock added, "And it is not compulsory for Humans to adopt logic, Doctor."

"Because you know it's not enough, Captain?" asked McCoy hopefully.

"No, Doctor, because Humans could never live by it."

McCoy threw him a furious glance and walked out, but not without having saluted most correctly first. I'll have to watch that he does not go too far, reflected Kirk, but arguments are better than no communications!

They were orbiting Earth and most of the Humans were on leave when Kirk was ordered to report to the Captain.

"You wanted me, sir?" he asked, saluting most correctly as usual.

"At ease. Sit down, Jim, this is not a formal interview. I may be able to help you achieve your ambition."

"Ambition? What ambition?"

"To become a Starship Captain. I have studied your record and reviewed your achievements aboard since you joined the Enterprise. You have definitely proved that you can take command decisions, and Starfleet is always on the lookout for Starship Captains. I propose therefore to recommend you for special training and promotion to my father, who has the power to get exemptions ..."

"No!" exclaimed Kirk with such loud vehemence that Spock put his hands to his ears.

"I'm not deaf..."

"Sorry, Captain, but I don't want promotion!"

"Do not decide so hastily, Jim, hear me out. You would have command of an Earth ship, the first one in Starfleet, with an Earth crew, and it is an honour you fully deserve."

Kirk was watching his Captain with great attention and yet could read nothing on the impassive features, while the eyes were expressionless. He was far from being able to read Vulcans at all times!

All right, if you want to get rid of me, I'll think about it! he decided, bewildered and a little upset. "May I have a few minutes to consider, sir?" he asked aloud.

"By all means."

So I would have my own ship, pondered Kirk, and if anyone had told me it would not make me jump with joy one day... and I would have a Human First Officer whose main preoccupation would be how soon he was going to step into my shoes! I could trust no-one except McCoy, if he came with me, and I would be too lonely for words. No thank you! Human company is no longer sufficient for me, but the main reason of course is that I would miss Spock too much, and there are many more things I can learn from him... But does my Captain wish me to leave? I can't believe it!

"Captain," he said at last, "I have much to learn at your side and have no wish to leave. The example of a close Vulcan/Human association would be beneficial, while my ambition was purely personal and I truly no longer care about it. I had hoped..." Kirk hesitated, but he had to know.

"What, Mr. Kirk?"

"That you would want to keep me as First Officer. I'll accept a strictly formal relationship with you if you are tired of befriending a Human."

Spock was watching him with his usual impassivity, but his eyes now showed concern in a very Human way which moved Kirk.

"I have hurt you, Jim, and I regret... You misunderstood me. I have no wish to lose you, either as First Officer or as friend, and your desire to remain at my side is very gratifying. But I had to suggest the promotion, because you deserved it, a matter of justice."

I should have guessed he would consider me before considering himself, and his loneliness if I left! thought Kirk, touched. Aloud, he stated simply, "I see. Thank you for the compliment, Captain, I may deserve it, but I do not want it."

"Then we'll say no more. Now that this matter has been dealt with, what about a game of chess?"

"With pleasure, Captain, and I'll beat you yet!"

"There is one thing which would gratify... one thing that I would appreciate, Jim," said Spock with a little hesitation.

"What is it, Captain?"

"I know it was only in times of stress, or danger, but you have called me 'Spock' on occasions..."

Kirk smiled happily. "I'll gladly do so off duty, Spock, and thank you for your... informality."

"You taught me informality, Jim."

Their eyes met understandingly; then Human and Vulcan turned their attention to the chess board.
